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the 1990s, the number of people with a mental health problem has increased by 50% (Mental Health Foundation 1999).

There is a growing awareness of the need to address the needs of people with mental health problems, and a number of initiatives have been developed to improve the lives of people with mental health problems. The Mental Health Act 1983 was amended in 1995 to give people with mental health problems more rights and to improve the way in which they are treated. The Mental Health Act 1995 was introduced to give people with mental health problems more rights and to improve the way in which they are treated. The Mental Health Act 1995 was introduced to give people with mental health problems more rights and to improve the way in which they are treated.

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HAUNTED LIVES.



VOL. I.



HAUNTED LIVES.

A Novel.

BY

J. S. LE FANU,

AUTHOR OF

“UNCLE SILAS,” “A LOST NAME,” ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1868.

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TO

MRS. FITZ GERALD,

OF FANE VALLEY,

This Story is Inscribed,

WITH KINDEST REGARDS,

AND MANY PLEASANT RECOLLECTIONS,

BY

THE AUTHOR.



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HAUNTED LIVES.



VOL. I.

HAUNTED LIVES.



VOL. I.

gate, and was admitted. It was a chariot, prettiest of all carriages—why discarded now I cannot imagine—four post-horses, and two postillions. They had travelled up from Gray Forest in the old-fashioned way—by the road and posting stations—not then on that line, superseded by rail. Hot and dusty were the horses that were pulled up at the steps. He ran down, and handed his pretty cousin from the carriage, and then her elderly kinswoman and companion, fat and rather amiable, and not very active. The springs yielded to her weight, of which that sagacious lady was as conscious as the elephant, and she leaned upon his shoulder, and then upon his arm, with a cautious emphasis that made him stagger.

Good Mrs. Wardell—that was her name—came in, very red, talking and giggling, and wheezing a little, and sat down in the dining-room to divide her journey, and recruit before essaying the stairs, under care of her maid, much the more elegantly got up of the two. Charles ran upstairs to the drawing-room, where he had seen his cousin,

light of foot, already looking from the window, as he lent Mrs. Wardell his arm up the steps.

Miss Laura Challys Gray was still standing between the voluminous silk curtains, looking out through one of the tall windows, as he entered the room. In shadow and reflected lights there is sometimes a transparent effect which heightens beauty; and I think he never saw her look so lovely as when she turned towards him from the light, as he entered. I pause for a moment to recall that pretty image.

She had removed her little bonnet, which dangled by its ribbon at one side from her slender fingers. Her rich brown hair, so wonderfully voluminous, in the shadow showed its golden glimmer where the dusky sunset touched it. Her large violet eyes, under the long curve of their lashes, were turned upon him. Nearly in shadow, her beautiful lips, with a light just touched in crimson, parted, and very grave. What a beautiful oval that little face was, and how richly her shadowy brown hair parted low

above her brows. As she looked at him this pretty face was thoughtful and nun-like, and after a little silence she said, with a very imposing seriousness :—

“ I think I shall like this out-of-the-way house, and the fifteen trees, and the half-acre of grass.”

“ Oh, I assure you, there’s a good deal more than you see from this. I should say there are at least two acres altogether, and fifty trees, reckoning——”

“ Reckoning the roses ?” she laughed.

“ No ; the lilacs and laburnums, which are enormous, and deserve to be counted in,” said he.

“ I think I shall like it,” she repeated a little imperiously, as much as to say, “ It is your place to listen at present, and mine to speak.” “ It looks old, and homely, and secluded. It has a monastic air ; and has not the slightest pretension to elegance, and is perfectly dull—*thank* you. You have acquitted yourself, so far as I see, to admiration. I can’t pronounce absolutely, however, until I look about me a little more.”

She spoke with such perfect good faith, and such an air of gravity and wisdom, that he was on the point of laughing.

But that would not have done: for Challys Gray, as she liked to style herself, was an imperious little queen; and when she was serious, expected all the world to be grave also.

There was not a folding door between the front and back drawing-rooms, but an ordinary door, with a very heavily carved casing, like the others in that house, which projected almost like a porch. Under this passed Miss Gray, and looked slowly round the other drawing-room.

“Yes, I like it; I’m sure I shall. It is a suitable house for old people. You need not laugh. Mrs. Wardell *is* actually old, and I am prematurely old, and no one that is not old, either in years, or, older still, in spirits, has any business here.”

“Come, Miss Challys, that wont do. You and your spirits, as you say, are precisely of the same age—each two-and-twenty—and that is very young, and you’ll not

like isolation long, with the great world and the gay world so near ; and you'll find this house, and the monotony you propose, the dullest whim that ever you engaged in."

"Well, that's very much my own affair, I suppose," said she. "Suppose my plan of life ever so absurd, it is worth a trial. I don't love the human race. I have no opinion of my species ; I have no cause ; and if I am to be happy it must be independently of human society ; and, after all, I'm not tied to this house. Should I tire of it, I can take my departure without asking any one's leave—I shall travel. I have half a mind to buy a yacht, and live on the sea, a sea queen, and treat the world as a picture-book—look at its scenery, and cities, and depute my courier to talk with its people."

"A misanthropist?" suggested he.

"No ; I don't say that quite," she answered, "but a person who, from experience, has formed no very high or pleasant opinion of her fellow-creatures, and, being her own mistress, means in a harmless way to live as pleases her best, and die an old maid."

"A passionless recluse?" he continued.

"Wrong, again. No, not passionless. With one passion very fixed—very wicked. What do you look at? Why do you laugh?" she demanded a little fiercely. "I say very wicked, not because it *is* wicked, but because the cant of the Pharisee and the cant of the world concur in calling it so. I don't choose to reason; I suppose I could if I chose, but I have no taste for arguing. I leave that to philosophers like you, who always lose their tempers when they engage in it. I read my Bible, and that is my church. I have no notion of being bullied by clergymen. I have gone into various places of worship, both at home and abroad, and I'm not particular about forms. None of them please me exactly, and none of them displease me altogether."

"Ah! Miss Challys," said he, raising his finger, and shaking his head, with a smile, however, "you are the same wild girl—Undine, before she acquired her soul."

"Thank you, Cousin Charles," she an-

swered; "I hope I have not said anything to call for an argument?"

"Because you should have to listen—is that it?"

"Listen! Well, I don't promise that. But I should have to answer it, I suppose."

He laughed.

"And I don't see why you need do battle for clergymen. You're not one. There isn't one present—I shouldn't abuse them if there were—and if one can't abuse people behind their backs, I'd like to know where's the liberty of a British subject."

"Very well argued, for a person who abhors reason," he said, applauding.

"I don't argue. I do despise reason. Our moral nature, instinct, passion, are divine, but reason came by eating of the tree of knowledge, at the persuasion of Satan, and is part of the curse of our Fall, and therefore devilish, and, what is worse, dull. I like this view better still," she said suddenly, as she looked from the back window. "There is so much green—trees and gardens, and I don't object to the stables,

and the roofs and chimneys through the leaves—the look-out is so like a country village. I shall make pets of all the birds—but none in cages. If liberty is so much to me, what must it be to them?—poor papa used to say. And I shall have a little King Charles or two. And where do they sell cats? I must get one of those great foreign cats. I'll have the most magnificent cat that ever was seen in Old Brompton. Every old maid sets up at the sign of the cat, and an old maid I'm going to be, and the sooner we set up the sign of my profession the better. You smile. Very well—you shall see."

"But you talked of a passion just now. It can't be *the* passion?" suggested he.

"Now, that's so like your sex! You poor weak men, when you hear passion spoken of, can imagine nothing but the insipid sentiment you call love. Come, rouse your energies, and be a—woman. I require a person of sense and energy, and you must please to get rid of your conventional ideas. You got my letter, of course?"

"Several," he answered.

"I mean about that triumvirate—the attorney, the Jew, and the clergyman."

"Yes, I told your solicitor," said Charles.

"I have no objection to see them, and I preferred seeing them here. When do they come?"

"To-morrow, at one o'clock, if that quite answers."

"Yes, quite—very good."

"And what do you mean to say to them?" he asked.

"How should I know? Come and hear. That is, I do know perfectly; but I shan't discuss it. I'm sure I'm right, and I don't want to be puzzled."

"Something wicked, as you say, I am sure. I see the wild light of Undine's eye again."

And he wondered mentally what she was going to do in the painful matter in which she was called on to pronounce.

"Well, never was Undine in so dusty a plight. Dear old Mrs. Wardell and I almost quarrelled about the windows and

such clouds of dust. So would you mind touching the bell for my maid? I suppose they have got my things upstairs by this time; you come back, do you mind? to tea, or dinner, or whatever it's to be. I hear Cousin Julia coming; she'll tell you."

Cousin Julia Wardell was indeed very audible; for the stairs creaked, and she panted and wheezed, and a shrilly lapdog barked and scampered all the way up.

CHAPTER II.

BROTHERS OF MERCY.

“WELL,” thought Charles, as he let himself out of the gate, “*this* freak wont last long; an heiress, well connected, and with her beauty! It would be the greatest pity in the world, but the comfort is she’ll tire of it in a fortnight, and confess her mistake in a month, and next season she’ll come out, and be presented, and have her head turned like the rest.”

Charles chose to present this little prediction to himself as his hope—and I think it might more nearly have resembled his fear.

He glanced back with a little sigh, as he closed the gate, and saw a broken view of the tall windows, and glowing old brick, and the weather-worn Caen stone facings.

“ Pretty creature she is, but there’s some odd want about her ; is it feeling or is it only sentiment?—*no*—yet she *is* like Undine without her soul. I always said so—playful, odd, harmless, I think—but also cold, vehement, and wild—a coldness that piques one. She talks so like a fool, too, and yet she has a provoking faculty of thinking.”

He did not return that evening to Guildford House. Such, I forgot to mention, was the style of the old-fashioned house in which my young cousin had established herself ; but in the morning his breakfast was interrupted by the arrival of a tall footman—inconsistency number one—with a note reminding him that he was to come to her at twelve o’clock, and saying that her solicitor was coming also. But it was plain she would wish to have a kinsman by, although from an odd wayward pride of hers she would not say so in so many words.

As he walked up the short straight avenue, dark with the shadow of old elms, it was still a quarter of an hour to the ap-

pointed time. Already Miss Challys Gray had been busy, and under her beautifying influence tall flowers were nodding and quivering in the great stone pots along the balustrade that ran before the windows, and on the drawing-room window-sills were other tinier flowers, and there he saw her as *I* always see her—looking from the shadow of the open window.

“See, I keep tryst,” said he, smiling up, as he held his watch toward her, standing on the steps.

“I can hardly tell at this distance,” said she, “though I have pretty good eyes—for seeing with,” she interpolated, observing his smile; “but my little clock tells me you are fifteen minutes before your time, so you are very good indeed.”

“You’ve been doing wonders already—such flowers—like the Indian enchanters, who make them grow up in ten minutes,” said he.

“You’ll find pictures also, and hung with very good taste, I can tell you,” she answered with a smile, well pleased that her energy was appreciated.

"Pictures!" said he; "where did you get them?"

"From Gray Forset, and they came last night. Go in, and see Mr. Gryston; you'll find him in the library—the room to the left—and I'll see you there, immediately;" and the pretty head drew back, and nothing but the nodding flowers remained. So in went Charles.

Guildford House was a rather stately old mansion, and really more spacious than from the outside one would have fancied. The hall was a square panelled chamber, with five doors, one facing the hall door, and two opening at either side under those heavy projecting cases, which went out, I believe, with the second George—but which have an air of solid pomp and comfort. Beyond, under a broader arch, were visible the wide stairs with their heavy banisters.

When he entered the first room, on the left hand, he found Mr. Gryston reading his *Times*. He knew that shrewd and reliable attorney, who set down his paper, and seemed tolerably glad to see Charles.

"I thought it was those people about De Beaumirail," he said, glancing at his watch; "it isn't quite time, though I think it would be desirable that I should see Miss Gray before they come, and on that account I came a little early. That fellow Levi is a most unscrupulous dog; and Larkin—I've met him once or twice in business, and he's sharp and not very straight; and the fact is, she ought to be cautious what she says—or rather she ought not to say anything, but just leave herself in my hands, d'ye see? and I thought I should have an opportunity of talking to her a little, for I don't know what view she takes, or what she means to do; do you?"

"I have not an idea," Charles answered, truly.

"They want her to let him out—they have some object, of course—but I don't see anything we can gain by keeping him in prison. There's that little property in France, it must be trifling, for they say he has very little to live on, and is ready to hang himself, poor devil!"

Charles Mannering did not know much about De Beaumirail. He knew, however, that the Gray family had suffered in more ways than one by his misconduct, and that he was, in the opinion of that family, at least, a very unredeemed *mauvais sujet*. He had lain in prison now for more than three years, refusing to give up some small property which his creditors could not themselves reach. It was in some respects a pitiable case. A young man who had figured some years ago brilliantly in the great world of Paris; he was of old French blood allied by marriage to English; his mother was a Challys, and related distantly to the Grays of Gray Forest.

Born to a great fortune, he had wasted it, in gaming and fabulous extravagance, in seven or eight years, and now he was, at thirty, a despairing prisoner in the London Fleet, with the alternative of ending his days there, or giving up the pittance which alone saved him from the direst penury. Liberty of course was not to be desired at that price. His creditors had begun to

forget him, his relations with them were assuming the character of routine, and the prisoner was subsiding into despair, when a simple old clergyman, named Parker, took up the case, and had succeeded in getting the creditors to agree to his discharge upon very easy terms indeed, and all that was now needed was the consent of the girl, Laura Challys Gray, who represented a very heavy claim for mesne rates and law costs which had accumulated in her father's time.

"I take an interest, of course," said Charles, "but I am quite ignorant of details."

"Miss Gray will be for letting him out very off-hand and generous, and I've thought it over, and I can't see any good in keeping him locked up any longer. Even if he did eventually give up that bit of property, I don't think we should be benefited to the extent of three hundred pounds, after all costs paid. But he'll *never* give it up, for he has nothing else to keep body and soul together, and he'll live and die where he is rather than take that step—d'ye see; so I

don't see any good in our thwarting her, if she wishes to open the door for him."

Mr. Gryston was a shrewd man, and respected, who knew the city and the profession, and knew something of most persons whom he was at all likely to meet in business.

They had not talked long when the deputation, as they styled themselves, appeared.

Tall, bald Mr. Larkin entered first, with a very well-brushed hat in his large lavender-gloved hand. He had on a lavender-coloured poplin waistcoat and lavender-coloured trowsers, and a perfectly new black frock-coat, that shone with a sleek gloss, and he wore his meek simper, showing gaps at either side, and his pink dovelike eyes glanced this way and that, expecting to see Miss Laura Challys Gray. He liked making a good impression upon rich people, in whom he always saw possible clients.

Mr. Gryston received this gentleman dryly and gravely, with a slight bow; and also the small Jew, Mr. Levi, with the great lurid, vigilant eyes, and sullen dangerous counte-

nance, and black hair, and many trinkets, who followed him closely. This gentleman walked about the room, picking up the books that lay in long rows on the floor, trying the strength of the binding by plucking the covers backward, breathing on the backs and rubbing the gilding with the sleeves of his coat, knocking and scratching the furniture, overhauling the construction of the bookcases, and staring sullenly in the faces of the two or three portraits with which Miss Gray had already hung the walls, with such an expression as one could fancy he might wear while beating down their price in a broker's shop. Charles longed to box his ears and send him about his business, and was on the point of interrupting his scrutiny rather peremptorily, when he suddenly tired of it, and with his hands in his pockets strode over and placed himself beside the agreeable and pious Mr. Larkin, and contributed now and then, uninvited, a drawling sentence to the conversation.

And now entered that venerable and simple clergyman, Mr. Parker, with no

trinkets like Mr. Levi, and whose clothes were by no means so new as the unexceptionable Mr. Larkin's.

With light blue eyes, guileless and kindly, he too looked round the room, as he entered with his white locks uncovered. He recognised Mr. Larkin gladly. Charles Mannering introduced himself, and then Mr. Gryston.

"Has Miss Gray arrived?" he inquired.

"Yesterday," answered Mr. Gryston, and looked again at his watch. "She'll be with us here, I expect, in five minutes." He signed to Charles Mannering, and walked to the window, and in a low tone said—"Run up to the drawing-room, please, and give her the caution I intended about Larkin and Levi, and tell her she needn't come down unless she likes; she has only to send me word what her wishes are."

"All right," said Charles, with a nod; but before he reached the door, it opened, and his pretty cousin, in her high-up morning dress, came in. I don't think she knew they were all assembled, for she drew back her foot a little surprised, but immediately

advanced, greeted Charles with a smile, and Mr. Gryston, and more gravely and coldly her other three visitors.

Among this little assemblage, in which white heads, and bald heads, and long heads, and very hard heads, were represented, this young and beautiful girl was an incongruous intruder, and perhaps a latent sense of the contrast prompted Mr. Gryston to say—

“I’ve been here some time, Miss Gray. I thought you might wish a few words, as it is a matter of business, and Mr. Larkin is a professional man”—Mr. Larkin’s smile was here one of preternatural innocence and urbanity—“and on the other side, you know—I mean, interested for Mr. Guy de Beaumirail.”

“I can hardly, in strictness, claim that honour”—interposed Mr. Larkin, blandly shaking his tall head.

“And it might, perhaps, be as well, Miss Gray,” continued Gryston, not minding, “that you should confer with me for a few minutes, before taking any step.”

“Thanks—no ; it’s quite simple, I fancy

—done in a word ; but I think I had better first hear what these friends of Monsieur de Beaumirail wish to tell me, as they have taken the trouble to come here.” She spoke to Mr. Gryston, and glanced graciously at these gentlemen. “Ask them to sit down.”

CHAPTER III.

AD MISERICORDIAM.

THEY did not sit down, they remained standing, everyone did, Miss Gray included; and Mr. Larkin, in parliamentary phrase, laid upon the table a paper with a series of signatures attached, which he, in his most engaging manner, informed Miss Gray, who stood near the other end of the table, with Gryston at one side and Charles Mannering at the other, was a consent signed by the creditors, for the release of Monsieur de Beaumirail, on the sole condition that their rights were not to be prejudiced by that step.

“I act in this matter, and I believe I may speak for Mr. Levi and his eminent and influential partner, entirely from motives of compassion, and I will say humanity.”

"Humanity—that'sh it—and compassion," echoed Mr. Levi, standing at his elbow, and eyeing the party with a sulky glare.

"Quite so, a Christian feeling, we hope; that is," said Mr. Larkin, suddenly recollecting Mr. Levi's faith—"a feeling of perfectly disinterested charity and commiseration."

"Commishera-a-tion," assented Mr. Levi, with emphasis.

"And we are actuated," continued Mr. Larkin, "in this, I will say, melancholy case, by no other motive."

"I'll take my oath of that," said Mr. Levi, to place the matter quite beyond doubt.

"And really, thrown professionally into contact with that unhappy though sadly misguided young man, I will say that it is impossible to contemplate his great, and I will add, his—a—a—eminent privations—without a sentiment of pity. 'Sick and in prison'—I take the liberty, Miss Gray, of quoting—'and ye visited me.'"

"Vishits him twishe a week,"—"and always finds him at home," he mentally added. But of course this latter was but an unspoken jocularly of Mr. Levi, who looked especially hang-dog, as he always did when he affected the philanthropic vein.

"Occasionally—just occasionally," said Mr. Larkin, blandly. "We don't make a boast, Mr. Levi, of any humble attentions, or unaffected—a—mitigations it may have been in our power to bestow."

"That'sh as true as the table-book, sho help me," said Mr. Levi, with more solemnity than was needed.

Pretty Laura Challys Gray looked at the window with an expression of pain and weariness, as if she would have liked to escape; and as there was a slight pause she said gently—

"Is there anything more?"

And Mr. Gryston ventured to suggest that it would be desirable if Mr. Larkin came to the point.

Whereupon Mr. Larkin "agreed—quite agreed—that feelings, however strong and

however unexceptionable," ought not to mix in business, and mentioned the nature of the application he had to make, and also the fact that without exception the other creditors had consented, as their names at the foot of the agreement now on the table attested.

Old Mr. Parker then asked to say a very few words; and he had something to add about the health of the unhappy prisoner, and was solemn, earnest, and pathetic.

A little silence followed, during which Mr. Larkin dipped the pen in the ink, and tendered it with a saddened smile and a graceful inclination to Miss Gray.

"I have heard everything now, haven't I?" she asked.

"We have nothing more to add," said Mr. Larkin, engagingly; and with the ends of his long lank fingers he slid the paper gracefully toward the young lady.

Mr. Gryston raised it and read it through, and turned it round and read it a second time; it was very short.

"You quite understand, Miss Gray? The

effect of this is to give Mr. Guy de Beaumirail his liberty, but without prejudice to any rights of yours as to any property of his which may hereafter turn up."

He placed the paper before Miss Gray, who looked not at him, but at it, in what is called a "brown study."

"We make a great sacrifice, gentlemen—our detainer amounts to more than half the other creditors' claims put together; but I suppose, as the others have done it"—and with this pause he presented the pen, which he had taken from Mr. Larkin's fingers, to his young and beautiful client, adding in a lower tone—

"I don't see any objection, Miss Gray, to your putting your name to this."

"But I do," said Miss Gray, in a faint icy voice that had a slight tremor in it, raising her head suddenly. "I won't sign it. I have quite made up my mind, Monsieur de Beaumirail shall remain where he is."

And with two or three little impatient waves of her fingers she put away the pen.

There was a silence. Mr. Larkin, staring at her, went on smiling inconsistently. Mr. Levi gaped luridly as if he was going to swear at her. Mr. Gryston glanced shrewdly at her, as if he doubted his ears for a moment, and then looked down demurely on the table, and played the devil's tattoo softly on it; and the clergyman, with his gentle eyes wide open, gazed on her with an alarmed uncertainty. The silence that followed was for a few seconds, but for Mr. Gryston's drumming, intense.

"Bega-a-ad!" boomed at last in the Jew's metallic tones.

Miss Laura placed her hand in her cousin's arm, and said, looking very pale, "Will you take me to the drawing-room? Good-bye," she added, in a low tone; and making a very grave and haughty inclination to the strangers, she drew near the door, which Charles opened for her.

The old clergyman followed quickly in a kind of consternation.

"But, my dear madam—my dear young lady—pardon me—you cannot possibly understand."

"I do, indeed, sir—I understand perfectly ; and I wish you and everyone to understand that I have quite made up my mind—that I know the effect of what I do, and that I am resolved that Monsieur de Beaumirail shall be punished, and my resolution is not to be altered by anything you can possibly say or urge ; I am sorry if I give you pain ; good-bye."

And with a more gracious farewell to the old clergyman, Miss Laura Challys Gray was gone, and standing at the back drawing-room window, before her audience down stairs had well recovered their surprise.

"You must ask that foolish old clergyman to luncheon, and Mr. Gryston, but on no account either of those dreadful men, the two people with that paper to sign," said Miss Gray to her cousin.

"Don't, pray, call him foolish, Laura," said Charles.

"And why not, pray ? He was foolish, and he *is* foolish. No sensible person talks so dogmatically as he did upon things he knows nothing about."

"I thought he spoke with good sense, and good feeling," said her cousin.

"You ought to *know* that he did neither—that is to say, that *I* have acted rightly in utterly despising his advice. I saw you were shocked, and I don't care; and do just go and give my message to that foolish clergyman and Mr. Gryston."

Charles smiled upbraidingly, shook his head, and left the room very gravely, thoughtfully even. Laura looked after him over her shoulder a little vexed.

"There goes another fool," she soliloquized. "What does it signify what they think? Nothing, while I'm sure I'm right—and one must be right, morally, at least, when one does from a superior motive that which is perhaps disagreeable to them; though it ought to be pleasant, very pleasant, and even *is* pleasant in a certain way."

Down stairs, the gentlemen passing through the hall, on their way out, heard brilliant and joyous music from the piano in the drawing-room. Mr. Larkin's heart was

not very deep in this matter, but the Jew heard this music very sourly. As he walked away, said he to Mr. Larkin—

“Who’d think that young woman, Miss Gray, was such a precious screw? When a woman likes money, doesn’t she like it, oh, no! They’ll go all the way to the devil and back, for a tizzy. Look there—that young man; where’s the good of his four bonesh locked up, to Miss Gray? What devils they are! And she knows he’s dying by inches there. What’s her income—you know something of it?”

“There’s Gray Forest, and the Yorkshire property, and they say a great investment in the funds. It’s certainly not less than eleven thousand a year, and people who should know, say it’s nearer thirteen,” said Larkin.

“And all for that one girl’s board, and clothing, living in Old Brompton. Bah! She’s a miser, and she’ll let that fellow die in quod for the chance of a ha’penny in the pound.”

“Very young, as you say, Mr. Levi, for so

much severity. I hope it is not covetousness—covetousness, which is idolatry, Mr. Levi.”

“You have a nische bit of money yourself, Larkin,” said Mr. Levi; “and they do shay you’re fond of it too; you take precious good care of it, and turns in a devilish nische per-shentage.”

“There are plenty of ’buses when we get down to the corner here,” said Mr. Larkin, mildly, and with his head rather high. He wished this little Jew snob to understand that there was some distance between him and a gentleman of Mr. Larkin’s position.

It was not pleasant having such a fellow hanging on him; it could not be helped though. They had promised to see M. de Beaumirail in his den, with the result of their suit, the success of which they had never doubted. But Mr. Larkin would sit back in the ’bus, and take out some letters and read them diligently, and so guard himself against the disconcerting familiarities of that questionable gentleman with the pretty

trinkets and somewhat villanous countenance.

Miss Laura Challys Gray laughed to herself pleasantly, as she played a brilliant air in the old-fashioned drawing-room of Guildford House. The slight pallor which had chilled her beauty at the moment of her passing sentence, as it were, of imprisonment for life on that ill-starred Monsieur de Beaumirail, had been succeeded by the brilliant colour of excitement; and gaily, as a girl going to her first ball, she glided round the room, smiled on her beautiful face in the mirror, glanced at the pictures, then stood at the window looking over the brilliant flowers that trembled in the air, and she saw the old clergyman in the seedy black, with the silken white hair, and thin, sad face, with his cotton umbrella in his hand trudging lonely down the short avenue.

She knocked at the window—he turned—she beckoned, and threw it up—she leaned out and beckoned again, smiling, and when he had reached the step, looking up with his sad wintry face beside the flowers that

rose high from the great stone flower-pot on the balustrade, imaging side-by-side the fragile beauty of young life and the bleak melancholy of age, she said—

“Pray excuse me, Mr. Parker, I was so much obliged for your letter. Wont you come in and let me thank you, just for a moment?”

He had raised his hat, and the light breeze blew over his thin white locks, as with his patient smile, looking up, he listened to that beautiful young lady with life before her, and with a gentle bow to her he re-entered the house.

“That stupid old man! He has walked all the way, I’m certain, he is so covered with dust, and he’s going away without any luncheon!”

When he came up, she again pressed her hospitalities upon him; but he declined. He made an old-fashioned early dinner in his lodgings, and intended the luxury of a seat in a ’bus to the Bank; and after a few words, and a silence, during which the old

man fidgeted a little with his hat and umbrella, as if about to take leave, the young lady very gravely opened the following conversation.

CHAPTER IV.

M. DE BEAUMIRAIL.

"I'M so sorry you wont take even a glass of wine—but—I did not wish you to go away without telling you why I refuse to let that wicked man, Monsieur de Beaumirail, out of prison."

The old man was standing; at these words he bowed his head, leaning his hand upon the table. It might be simply an attitude of attention, or it might be that the subject was painful, and that he did not care to look in her face while discussing it.

"I ought to mention," he said, "that the unfortunate young man is a distant relation of my own—so distant as almost to count for nothing. I mention it only lest your ignorance of the circumstance should affect the spirit of what you are going to say; not

that it need be so, for, as I say, the relationship is very remote."

"I have lost my father; I have lost my sister; I stand alone in the world, sir. My father suffered from a complaint under which he might have lived for very many years to come, but his life was cut short by the excitement and anxiety of a wanton attack upon his property. My sister died when I was very young, seven years ago. They called it consumption—it was a broken heart. The lawsuit which hurried my father's death was instituted by a man who snatched at that desperate chance to redeem his fortunes from the ruin in which his selfish prodigality had plunged him. My sister's heart was broken by the same unscrupulous man, who first won her love, and then deserted her, and that cold, frivolous villain was Guy de Beaumirail. You did not know all that, sir, when you wrote and spoke to me as you did."

The clergyman shook his head.

"Certainly not; I knew there had been some litigation. But, whoever may have

first moved it, let us remember it was De Beaumirail who suffered, and I must add, that even had I known every circumstance you have mentioned, I should have applied to you in his behalf all the same."

"Then, sir, you would have taken a great liberty," said Miss Gray, flushing brilliantly.

"I don't mean to argue a case that does not exist, ma'am, but I avail myself of this opportunity to re-open the suit which I ventured to prefer on his behalf."

Miss Laura Challys Gray had taken nothing by her motion, neither did old Mr. Parker by his.

"Really, sir," she said, "this is too provoking."

"Admitting that you have had provocation, my dear young lady, remember that you are bound to love them that hate you, to do good to them that despitefully use you and persecute you, to bless them that curse you."

"Twaddle, sir—as you misapply and pervert the words—twaddle and nauseous

cant. How *can* you talk so?" said the young lady, changing colour rapidly.

"Oh, my dear Miss Gray, oh, pray, you don't seem to reflect how very shocking such language is," said the old clergyman.

"You don't seem to reflect, sir, how very shocking yours is! what a perversion of the Bible! We are told to discriminate between the wicked and the good; we are told to have natural affections; we are told to have common sense, and common fairness, and common decency; to honour our parents, and not, that I remember, to honour their murderers."

"My dear ma'am, the obligations of charity are immense; read Saint Paul—read his first epistle to the Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter; read the sermon on the Mount, the sixth chapter of Saint Matthew."

"I know it all, sir; I know the Bible as well as anyone need; but it is not to be read all at one side; reconcile your blind charity with Saint Paul's command, that he that will not work, neither shall he eat; and if any

man, being a professed Christian, be also a sinner, we are commanded to let him be accursed, and to avoid him as if he had the plague. Sir, your distortion of our reasonable faith is a blunder; it is imbecile, and not only imbecile, but wicked; and if I thought you represented Christianity truly, I should cease to be a Christian. I am sorry I have detained you; I expected to find you accessible to reason, and I have found you a clergyman—exactly—exactly a clergyman, and I feel very like a fool, sir, and—and I’ve only to say, good-bye.”

So, for his sound doctrine this old gentleman received a sound jobation, and the beautiful young lady, the spoilt child, looked wonderfully brilliant, and handsome, as she blew him up. With a bow, and a faint sad smile of patience—not put on, quite unconscious—he drew towards the door, and without more parley, disappeared.

“We are both fools, but he’s the oldest,” she said, in soliloquy, with the same carmine tint in her cheeks. “And now he’s gone to shake off the dust from his feet, and plenty

of dust he has got there—for a testimony against me.” She looked at her watch. It was later than she thought. She touched the bell, and ordered up her cousin, Charles Mannering, from the library. She complained of the clergyman, and commanded Charles, as it were, to agree with her. But Charles, on the contrary, took the other side—very quietly, at first, but more spiritedly, as she urged him. She was very much vexed—more than she quite cared to show.

“When you have quite finished your lecture, tell me, and I shall tell you its effect.”

“I hope I have not been very impertinent,” said he, a little awkwardly, as he stood by the window and plucked a little blossom from one of the flowers that stood there. “I should not have mentioned the subject—I should not have ventured, only that you asked my opinion.”

“I did not give you leave to pluck my flowers though, and that’s of more consequence than anything you have said,” she observed, a little angrily.

"Oh! I really wasn't thinking. I'm so sorry;" and he placed the little sprig gently on the table.

"And you two gentlemen might as well have spared your eloquence. It is pleasant, though one knows one is right, to have people to agree with us. But *we* disagree about everything, I think; not that it matters much, for it has not the slightest effect; that vain, worthless man shall be punished, with God's help, while I am spared to punish him; and your tiresome sophistries and platitudes have no effect but to heighten the disgust with which I have been always accustomed to hear you men support one another, through thick and thin, in all your enormities and oppressions, provided they have been directed against my miserable sex. I'm going out for a drive with Mrs. Wardell; and I shan't much mind if I don't see you again till this day week."

With which rude speech she left the room. Charles picked up the little flower he had laid on the table, and smelled at it once, and twice, absently, although it had no perfume;

and twiddled it in his finger and thumb for a little, feeling indistinctly very much annoyed with his pretty cousin ; much more vexed, in fact, than I think he would have been had she not been so pretty ; and away went he under censure, like the clergyman.

“ This day week — well, perhaps so, though this day fortnight may answer me as well ; better, by Jove,” said he, as he drove sulkily along Piccadilly towards his club.

In a dingy room in the Fleet, about the same time, a young man in slippers and dressing-gown, without a necktie, pale, utterly *ennuié*, with a long beard that added a premature gravity to the dejection of his face, nipped his lip with his teeth, with a frown of sudden pain as he listened to the close of Mr. Larkin’s polished statement, heard his gentlemanlike condolences on their failure, and the metallic drawl of Mr. Levi as he contributed his share to the dolorous and vengeful duo.

The old clergyman was looking out upon

the listless yard through a window which wanted cleaning. A silence followed the close of the dismal narrative. The Jew sat down and made half-a-dozen notes in his pocket-book, and totted a sum or two, and pulled out some letters.

Mr. Larkin being a polite person, and, as he liked reminding people, a gentleman, awaited with considerate attention the remarks which such a narrative might not unnaturally draw from a person in Mr. Guy de Beaumirail's situation.

That gentleman looked down on the agreement which lay upon the table, with the same sharp frown, drawing the paper toward him, and he drew his finger slowly down from signature to signature in a dreamy despair—there were so many; he had come so near his liberty—within one name. A pencil line was drawn where that talismanic name was to have been written, and with the same pencil thoughtful Mr. Larkin had traced the words "Miss Gray will have the goodness to sign *here*." De Beaumirail sighed heavily as his finger traced the

descending file of names till it reached Mr. Larkin's inscription, and there it stopped, and gradually a strange smile, weary, patient, bitter, lighted up his pale face.

Mr. Larkin "hem'd" slightly to remind him that he was at hand and attentive. But notwithstanding this inducement, silence continued until that painful smile had slowly waned, and De Beaumirail, with his hands in his pockets, shuffled lazily to the clumsy old sofa, covered with faded red stuff, laid down with tarnished brass-headed nails, that stood at the far end of the room, and he took the arm of this in his hand, as if he was trying its strength with a tug or two; and, said he, in a low tone—

"The wretch! I hope to God she may cry for mercy yet, and die without it."

And De Beaumirail, with this brief soliloquy, threw himself down on the sofa, with his face to the wall, and lay there at his listless length.

Tall Mr. Larkin looked with his pink eyes at the clergyman, and slowly shook his tall,

bald head, and red whiskers, and raised his large hand in religious pain.

Then Mr. Levi and he talked a little in murmurs by the window, about another matter, and the attorney and he appointed a meeting for next day; and soon, the good old clergyman finding himself alone with Monsieur de Beaumirail, accosted him mildly, as he lay on the sofa—

“You must allow me to say, my dear young friend, that I heard what you said, with pain; your words were not Christian.”

“They were as Christian as I meant them to be,” said De Beaumirail without moving.

“It is a sad disappointment,” said the clergyman.

Silence followed this remark.

“It is, indeed, a great blow.”

De Beaumirail made no comment.

“So young and so wealthy, yet insisting upon extreme rights with so much severity, and in a very vengeful spirit. I have been deeply disappointed,” said the old man.

Still no answer came.

“Sir, I deplore it—I feel for you deeply—

it is, indeed, a blow!" and after a pause he added, a little hesitatingly—

"If I thought you would wish me, in this trying hour, to pray, or even to read with you——"

"I thank you, no—I'll try a cigar instead, and a saunter round the court."

CHAPTER V.

BEYOND THE PRECINCTS OF GUILDFORD HOUSE.

GUILDFORD HOUSE missed a visitor next day. Its sober red brick and Caen stone, and its short dark files of rugged elms, saw not the passing shadow of Charles.

He had "sulked." He was quite high with his pretty cousin. He was lonely and short-tempered, but he didn't wish to go near her, and mightn't for many a day. But the day after, a little note reached him, asking, "Where *have* you been, or what have you been doing? Have you forgotten us quite, or why should I have the trouble of writing? Don't you remember there are fifty things to be done, and what are you good for if not to consult with? Pray do come immediately. I do want a little advice about tradesmen and other things, and espe-

cially about hanging the other pictures. When we are a little settled, and have entered on the regular humdrum life we propose, you shall have leave of absence—a long one, if you insist; so comfort yourself with that hope, and in the meantime help us poor women in our loneliness.”

“Capricious, disingenuous, impudent—what a sex they are! If I did right, I shouldn’t go, I suppose—but is it worth a quarrel?” said Charles, very much pleased, I think; and he arrived in the ’bus at the corner next Guildford House more promptly than was, perhaps, strictly dignified, under the circumstances of his sudden recall.

So his friendly relations were restored, and their conversation was untroubled by an allusion to Guy de Beaumirail. The fuss of settling was nearly over, and as things began to subside into that humdrum in which Miss Laura Challys Gray chose to discover, for the present, the secret of human happiness, she began, he fancied, to grow already ever so little weary of the half-conventional and (according to the “arcadian”

portrayed in Dresden china) half-arcadian simplicity of life in which she had embarked.

"Well, Miss Challys, a little slow, isn't it?"

"Slow! Life's always slow, if you mean dull; but this is nothing like so stupid as living in a round of balls, concerts, and kettle-drums. I saw *that* for half a season; an interval of quiet has saved me, and nothing on earth shall ever tempt me back again into that enervating and headaching intoxication.

"You'll not endure it long," insisted Charles, with a smile.

"You don't, however, fancy that I'm quite a fool," she said, "and no one but a fool could think of living without either occupation or amusement. I shall soon find both for myself; there are many things to be seen."

"And some people," suggested Charles. "I suppose you'll see your relations?"

"Well, yes, some of them, I must, I suppose. But there's no need to be in any great hurry. I sometimes think I might

very well wait till they find me out; and in this wilderness of London, I might be hidden for a long time."

"I know you are a misanthrope, you told me so; but are the Ardenbrokes and the Mayfields on your black list; wont they think it very odd your avoiding them?"

"I shan't avoid them. I like them, on the contrary; but there are times when one prefers postponing even what they like, and I think I should wish to dream away a few months of my life in this place first; just to try my experiment fairly."

Here was a silence. She had set Charles down to a little task of copying a song. She had laid down her work, and, leaning back in her chair, looked out of the window through the flowers. It was a listless hour.

"I call it an experiment, my good friend Charles, because you are pleased to be satirical upon the subject, and I was in a cowardly mood, I suppose. But it isn't an experiment. I mayn't like this life very much; but every day I feel a greater reluctance to enter upon the other—that gay

world, the season, and all that. I saw quite enough of it to know that it is insincere, cold, unmeaning, and does not suit me; my idea of life is quite different. It must not be all simper, glare, and headache. Let the groundwork be a good, broad, neutral tint, like this sober existence, on which such sober lights as I may care to throw shall tell with the brilliancy of contrast; above all, let me be free—the liberty to do as I please—live how I like, and go where I list—my birthright—my liberty—to think of selling it for such a mess as that insipid and reckless world can offer!”

Charles looked up from his music and smiled.

“I’m quite in earnest—why do you smile?”

“Exactly *because* you are in earnest,” he replied.

“A little oracular, aren’t you?—but I see you are amused at the profundity of my self-delusion; you shall see; wait a little; you don’t know half.”

Charles was very much pleased, I think,

at those sober resolves, and I fancy that it was his secret apprehension that they would never bear the strain of surrounding temptation that made him affect to treat her professions so slightly.

"I forget—let me see—where am I to take you to-day? Oh, yes, the ancient armour—the exhibition of water-colours;—and you said you'd look in again at Westminster Abbey, and there was something else; but don't you think you are pretty sure to light on some of your people in some of these expeditions?"

"‘Sufficient to the day.’ I dare say I shall—so much the worse—well, and what follows?"

"Nothing particular; only it might be as well that you should call or report yourself, as be found out."

"Now, do pray be quiet—you're growing such a tease—you have no idea—and it is so stupid. Let them find me out, if they must—I'll not go to their parties, and if they grow seriously troublesome it is very easy to go somewhere else—just as easy as

it was to come here ; besides, you fancy my plans are all whims and caprices. When the truth is, I have no spirits—no energy—and a positive dislike of nearly everyone—and a genuine horror of all that sort of thing you fancy I secretly like. I can't prevent your thinking—if so, it must be—that I am telling stories ; but, remember this, I never told a lie in my life, and anyone who tells me an untruth, I *never* forgive ; and that sort of thing would, you know, of itself disqualify me for all the amenities of human society.”

“ Here's the carriage, I think ;” he interrupted, as I heard the iron gate swing back, and the roll of the wheels.

“ So it is ; and where is Julia Wardell ? Oh ! there—walking up and down before the steps.”

So they went out, and had their drive, and saw their sights, and did their shopping, Charles dutifully accompanying them ; and he came back again with them, and dined at Guildford Hall, and drank tea there.

“ What are we to do to-night, Cousin

Julia—how are we to pass the evening?" inquired Miss Gray, who delegated the prerogative of thinking to her fat chaperon.

"Well, dear, anything. What do you say? You don't like cards——"

"I don't know how to play—I think I shall learn some time or other. I do know how to play 'beggar-my-neighbour'—but that's all. What do you say, Charles?"

"I say this—and I'm sure Mrs. Wardell will support me—that enjoying good music and the opera, as you do, you ought to take a box for the remainder of the season, and go there whenever you feel inclined—it will do you good."

"*Immense* good," acquiesced fat Mrs. Wardell, who, though she liked her sly nap in the evening in her cushioned chair, had also a liking for what she called a little "refined amusement" now and then. "*Immense* good! and I'll tell you why," she exclaimed, with an enthusiasm which cost her a fit of coughing, by which the remaining argument or exhortation was lost to the world.

"I don't see why I shouldn't—I think the opera is quite within my conventual vow ; there is just the objection that friends may see me, and fancy they are obliged to make me out—but I can reconnoitre carefully before coming to the front, and I need not be much in evidence."

"Then, you authorize me?"

"Yes. Shall I?"

"Certainly," answered Charles.

"You'll say I'm inconsistent—I know you will—and it will be very treacherous if you do," said she.

"But I'll do nothing of the kind ; on the contrary, I shall be very glad."

"Because," she continued, "you advised it, remember ; and, after all, it is merely transporting our little party to a smaller room, where we can listen to good music, and may be as much to ourselves as here."

"Then I am commanded by you to do the best I can to-morrow? We can get a box for to-morrow, and see how you like it."

"Well, yes—you may ; and I'm glad you

advise it. I think, after my vows of solitude, I should have been half ashamed to hint at it, so soon at least; but I've begun to have an uncomfortable kind of presentiment—I don't know what it is—an anticipation, an omen."

As she spoke she got up and sat by the window, looking out on the short, dark double row of trees, through whose rugged stems the moonbeams crossed.

"I know that kind of thing," said fat Mrs. Wardell plaintively; "I have experienced it, my dear—and in my case it was always followed by some affliction, particularly once," and she touched her handkerchief to her eyes.

"But I won't believe in omens," said Laura Gray; "and after all, I don't see that there is any form in which grief can well reach me now; of course I may die like anyone else, but this is not the sort of apprehension."

Mrs. Wardell touched the cushion beside her, and her little dog obeyed the signal, and she, in murmurs, and the dog in snarls,

carried on a dialogue; while Charles followed his pretty kinswoman to the window, and in a tone accordant with the moonlight hour, asked with a smile—

“And what *is* your terrible presentiment?”

“I begin to think it *is* better having something of that kind to occupy one—to look forward to,” said Miss Gray, half thinking, half answering him. “I have felt so oddly—I’m sure its nervous—a kind of fancy that I am—how shall I describe it?—watched—well, not exactly watched—a kind of feeling that I am going to meet somebody—I don’t know whom—whom I have never seen, perhaps, except in a dream, or somehow,” she laughed, “in a pre-existent state, a kind of expectation mixed very largely with fear. And, of course, you and I know that the whole thing is purely nervous.”

“But how do you mean *watched*—have you any reason to suspect any such thing? I’d like to see anyone presuming ——”

“No; there’s no cat looking at the king

or queen, that I know of," said Miss Gray ;
"and *apropos* of cats, you have not brought me the cat you promised—and an old maid without her cat is a witch without her familiar—and pray do choose me one of those huge creatures. I should so like one of those splendid northern tigresses."

"My darling Laura, you're not really going to bother Mr. Mannering about a cat. You haven't an idea what odious animals they are!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell, who thought it might not contribute to the comfort of her lapdog.

"I had not an idea you heard me, Julia, darling. But there's no contending with instinct; unlike you, I'm going to be, as I said, an old maid—and so the invincible affinity between me and those demure and comfortable animals—so reserved, so querulous, and with such nice little claws, on occasion."

"I'm sure you're not serious," said Mrs. Wardell, with a lurch towards her lapdog on the cushion. "No; she would not, she couldn't be so cruel as to bring in a great

big beast to the housey-wousey—to eat up poor little darling, precious Scampsciums, that its old mother doats upon !”

And the dog, with a sympathetic wriggle, playfully snapped at her nose, which, with an adoring smile, she had approached perhaps incautiously near. A squeak of alarm from Julia Wardell, and a shrill bark from the charming animal, and then a torrent of endearments from its fat and indulgent “mother,” as she termed herself, closed the little episode.

And now their early evening drew to a close, and Charles Mannering took his leave ; and he had hardly gone when the postman knocked. He left a letter, from which seemed gradually to germinate, as from a bulb, a living stem of romance that bore its sombre boughs, its blossoms, and its strange fruit, and gradually cast an inexplicable gloom upon her life.

CHAPTER VI.

A DIAMOND LOCKET.

"How very late for a letter!" said Miss Gray, who was thinking of going to her room. "I have only had four since we came here. A letter is quite an event—and this comes so late! Oh, here it is."

And the servant brought her a square letter, addressed with a broad-nibbed pen, and a firm hand, which she did not know, to "Miss Gray, Guildford House, Old Brompton."

She turned this letter round curiously. She had not six correspondents in the world. All her letters of business went direct to Mr. Gryston. This autograph she had certainly never seen before. It was a bold, rather large hand.

The letter contained a small enclosure—

a coin, perhaps—and was sealed in black wax, with a very odd device. The motto said, in French, “Choose which dart,” and represented Cupid with his arrow drawn to the head at one side, and, at the other, Death with his javelin brandished—a small, but very distinct and beautifully cut seal. Solitude and monotony form the discipline which prepares the nerves for odd impressions, and Laura Challys Gray was predisposed toward that vague superstition which has more to do with the nerves than reason.

It was a London letter, dropped in a West-end office; and this also troubled her. Her retreat had been discovered—and so soon! With a growing anticipation of something disagreeable, and a wish that it had never come, she glanced again at the bold, distinct character of the address, and at the hurried, blotted monogram—now undecipherable—which was traced in the corner. Was it a monogram or only an accidental mark? She could not make it out, but she thought it was a blotted monogram.

Her intuitive misgiving postponed the moment of certainty, and when Mrs. Wardell asked—

“Well, Laura, dear, what does it say?”

She answered—

“Don’t ask me now, dear. I should hate to open it. Some stupid thing, I dare say, that should have gone to Mr. Gryston. We can read it at breakfast. It’s from no one that we know.”

When she got to her room she laid it, still unopened, on her table; and it was not until her maid had gone that, unable to resist longer, she opened it.

It contained an enamelled gold locket, very prettily set in brilliants. It was not new; it had lain long in the piece of tissue paper that was wrapped round it, and was a little tarnished. It contained some very silken, dark brown hair, a little like her own; and on the other side some interlaced initials were engraved, which she did not stop to decipher.

The writing in the letter was in the same

hand, but much smaller and more elegant than that upon the envelope.

It spoke thus :—

“MISS LAURA CHALLYS GRAY,—You will never know more of me than I chose to disclose. That, for certain reasons, shall be little. I observe, with admiration and respect, how, with firmness and justice beyond your years, you have answered the application of De Beaumirail. You remember your father; you remember your sister—I know not for what purpose, if not to subserve the ends of justice, our affections were made strong enough to outlive the frail beings to whom they were dedicated. The retribution is virtuous—persist! This locket, which I once had thoughts of giving to a degraded kinsman, De Beaumirail, contains your dead sister’s hair. Deserve my good-will. Go where you will, my eye is upon you. Do what you will, my hand can reach you. Those who know it not are not to learn from you, that De Beaumirail is a prisoner. He is *almost*, and shall be utterly forgotten. What am I—man or woman—

young or old—kind or malignant—whence come I—whither go I? With respect to you, the writer is a *shadow*—a shadow, however, that if your path be crooked will cross it.”

“A weak invention of the enemy,” said Miss Laura Challys Gray, making her quotation with an uncomfortable smile. “The enemy! But what enemy have I, except, I suppose, that wicked De Beaumirail? and this, certainly, is no friend of his.”

She read the letter through again.

“What a piece of melodrama! The idea of trying to frighten a sane person with such rubbish!”

She examined the seal again and again, tried to make something of the little scribble in the corner, and, standing in her slippers and dressing-gown, read the whole thing through once more.

“It’s a mere hoax! Who can it be? It certainly is not Charles Mannering. There is no one but Ardenbroke,” she thought. “It must be he—but, oh no. I forgot the allusion to my sister and father. And this

little locket—no; that's quite out of the question."

"What a contemptible thing," she murmured, sitting down in a great chair by the fireplace. "How ridiculous! What an idea the writer must have of me, to fancy I should be frightened or influenced by such a device."

She looked down at the slipper in which her tiny foot was tapping the floor; and then looking up, smiling, she said—

"And what a fool I am to think for a moment about it. I would tear it into little bits but that I may chance to trace the author by the writing, and I half doubt whether it is worth sparing till to-morrow morning."

She was more interested by it, however, than she was quite aware, and more alarmed. It seemed, little by little, to her exaggerated fears, that the privacy of her life was gone, a secret eye watching her intensely, and an undetected and possibly potent influence interfering with her daily life. "Kind or malignant"—here, at all events, were

evidences of an unaccountable interest in her doings, of the accuracy with which the writer was informed, and the malignant pretensions with which he or she affected to control her conduct. She was growing more uncomfortable.

When she lay down she could not sleep, but lay awake in excited conjecture. Every theory she framed broke down. Sometimes it seemed that her own servants were spies upon her; sometimes that the simple old clergyman had unwittingly made a confidant of some masked enemy of De Beaumirail's.

But these conjectures gave place, and failed one after the other, and left her with the uneasy sense of being watched by an unseen eye—a vague suspicion and constraint that gathered strength as the minutes passed, and assured her that her solitude was false.

On the table by the fireplace lay the letter, and on it the locket, which, amid the dark thoughts that gathered about her, glimmered with a sinister brilliancy in the distant light which she had left burning on

her dressing-table. In the obscure light, that little glimmering circle simulated to her fancy the steady eye that observed her, and associated with the relic of her dead sister, helped to wring her girlish imagination with a strange pain.

She was glad she had preserved the letter. She was resolved to find out who wrote it. She would consult her friends; she would charge Gryston with it; she would place it in the hands of the London detectives; she would lose her life but she would discover the author of the letter—and, what then?

“ Well, it can’t be legal, for it is certainly cowardly and wicked to try and frighten poor creatures like me with anonymous letters. If the laws permit *that* sort of thing, pretty laws we live under !”

CHAPTER VII.

ROBERT LE DIABLE.

BEHOLD our little party installed in the box which had been promptly secured in the name of Miss Gray, Guildford House, Old Brompton.

“Something a little triste, I always thought, in the aspect of this great house—I mean, compared with a theatre; these little curtained pigeon-holes, *real* boxes, partitioned, and dim—very splendid, the *coup d’œil*, a sort of oriental richness—superb and luxurious, but also a little gloomy,” said Miss Gray.

She was leaning back in her chair, and making a cautious survey of the long sweep of boxes, which were beginning to be inhabited.

“I wish one could see without being seen. Have the Ardenbrokes a box?”

"Yes, over there; no one in it," said Charles. "You have found out some one you know—haven't you?"

"Have I? Where?" said Miss Gray, lowering her glasses, and looking at him.

"Somewhere over there; haven't you?" said he.

"Oh! Perhaps so," she answered, with a smile and a little shrug. "I had better look again."

And she did turn her glasses in the direction he indicated, and he saw them again linger, he fancied, at the same point in their circuit. It was at a box where sat two gentlemen, whose appearance had already struck him.

One was an elderly man, with a long, close-cropped, gray head, gray whiskers, and well-waxed moustache of the same colour, whose white-gloved hands, folded together, rested on the edge of the box, as, with a grave face, rather apathetic, and with features commonplace, insignificant, but on the whole grim, he looked steadily towards the stage. The other was a singularly handsome and

elegant-looking young man, with dark hair, moustache, and small peaked beard in the Italian style, an oval face, and large soft eyes, and delicately pencilled eyebrows. This face was very feminine. There was colour in the cheeks, and a soft lustre in those large eyes, with their long lashes, and a soft carmine touched the lips. The waving hair lay low upon a very white forehead. Altogether, the tints and formation of the face were feminine and delicate, and there was something of fire and animation, too, that gave it that kind of beauty that belonged to the great Italian tenor in his young days.

When Charles Mannering's glasses rested on this face, it was with an unpleasant feeling—a little pang of scarcely conscious jealousy—an intuition of antagonism. He was standing behind Miss Gray, and, stooping as he lowered his glasses, he said with an unreasonably bitter feeling—

“There are two fellows over there. Did you observe them? An old gray man who seems to have come to hear the opera, and a

young man—such a specimen of a man-milliner! He seems to have painted under his eye-lashes, and put on some rouge. He certainly has, and he has done nothing since he came in but stare at all the women in the house. He'll get himself a precious good kicking if he doesn't take care." So spoke Charles, and affected a little laugh.

"I don't think I've seen anyone answering that description," said she, indifferently.

"Oh! you *must* have observed him. You won't deny it, you who hate anything that resembles—what shall I say?—a concealment."

"I know whom you mean, perfectly, but you don't describe him," she laughed.

"How do you know, then?" he asked drily.

"A caricature is not a description, and yet it may indicate a person, and you forget that you have helped me by mentioning that old man with the long gray head. Well, tell me—what is it?"

"What is *what*?" inquired Charles.

"Weren't you going to tell me something about them?"

"I? Story, Lord bless you, I have none to tell. Interesting subject, no doubt; but I was merely thinking how like a girl in masquerade he is."

"I don't agree with you. I think his figure so manly—manly and elegant."

"Oh! I spoke of his face."

"I think him very handsome—he *is* handsome—I don't say exactly in the style I admire, but you must see that he is. Hush! We are going to have that divine tenor again. Oh! isn't that voice angelic?"

This night there were selections from two operas. The scenes from "La Sonnambula" had closed. In the interval between it and those that followed from "Robert le Diable," the people in Miss Gray's box, who had talked now and then during the singing, grew perversely silent. Most persons whose spirits are at all capricious have at times experienced in a theatre something like the sensation which that young lady on a sudden felt just now. A

sudden air of desolateness seemed to overspread the stage; an idea of cavernous solitudes beyond, half-lighted and silent, made the scene joyless and unreal; the illusion failed; imagination and the spirits collapsed together; the music sounded jaded and forlorn; the lights grew less light, and fancy and enjoyment chilled.

The descent of the curtain did not dissipate this odd depression; she leaned back; the whole scene had lost its interest. "It comes from over there—this influence comes from that singular looking person. Such strange beauty, such brilliant intelligence, and yet such a gleam of malevolence as sometimes looks half fiendish—he is the writer of that letter enclosing the locket with poor, darling Maude's hair; and that horrid old man beside him, so stiff and apathetic, who has never turned his head once, or changed a muscle of his gray face, and whose arm moves as if it was made of wood, he looks as if he were dead, and just animated for this occasion. I wish so much I had not come."

This young lady, looking apathetically forward over the heads of the distant people in the stalls, over the foot-lights, to the line where the gray boards and the curtain meet, is conscious of those images which disturbed her, reflected obliquely on her eye—that brilliant, malignant young man; that cadaverous old one. Had these two figures and faces in reality all that sinister character with which they seemed to present themselves to her? Not one particle, possibly. I can't tell. Miss Laura Challys Gray had a fancy highly excitable, and sometimes sombre. An intuition, fancied or real, told her that the young man in the box at the other side was the author of that letter, which, in spite of every effort, troubled her more and more. And from this one speck, gradually rose and spread that darkness through which she saw all things changed.

This "Robert le Diable" did not find in that house a spectator so pre-disposed to receive in good faith the whole melodramatic impression of that great church-

yard scene. The peaks and shafts of the ruined abbey, glimmering in moonlight, the terrible necromantic basso, and the sheeted phantoms, all but a moving picture—had yet a relation to real emotions which circumstances and fancy had already set in motion within her; and Miss Gray, to whom accident made the opera and all such scenic glamour still new, gazed on in the sort of erie rapture with which she might have read, for the first time, in the solitude of her room, the ghostly scene in the “Lay of the last Minstrel” in the aisle of Melrose Abbey.

Had Charles suspected how rapt and thrilled she was, he would, no doubt, have smiled, notwithstanding his pre-occupation. She was absorbed—music, scene, and figures, all blended in one solemn, supernatural impression that was for her quite genuine. Leaning back again, with a sigh, as if something drew her, without thinking, she turned her glasses unconsciously on the box where these people sat. The effect was startling.

Through her glasses she saw, it seemed but four feet removed, straight before her, the person of whom she had been thinking so disagreeably. That young man held his glasses on the edge of the box, in both hands, as if he had but that moment lowered them. The sensation was as if their eyes at that short distance had met. His were directed on her with a steady, stern, and penetrating gaze, that seemed to hold her fixed for a moment—his face lighted with a faint smile of recognition.

With a kind of start she turned her glasses away, and carried them slowly on—a feminine effort to conceal the effect of that accidental encounter over a space so wide. She felt her cheeks, her very throat and forehead flush intensely, and then a chill and pallor came. There seemed to her a character of menace in that smile, and she felt that she was detected, and probably her thoughtless look misinterpreted.

She could have cried with vexation and terror. She had not time to reflect what a

fool she was. A vague suspicion, however, of the light in which others might view her uneasiness about the whole occurrence, and some other feelings, had made her lock the letter and the locket up, and evade good Mrs. Wardell's inquiries in the morning. That was her first secret.

At this moment she felt so uncomfortable and disconcerted that she would gladly have got up and left her place. She did not wish to talk over her folly with other people; her reluctance to divulge to old Mrs. Wardell, and to Charles, the odd occurrence of yesterday evening, had grown upon her, and was now insurmountable; and Challys Gray had a scornful hatred of even the smallest and most harmless untruths, which unfitted her, a good deal, as she felt, for the benevolences of the world.

In the meantime Charles, whom the handsome unknown had also impressed as disagreeably, though quite in a different way, again looked at him from his less prominent post of observation.

The young man who had excited the contempt of Charles still occupied more of his attention than the opera. He fixed his glasses on him for a moment, with a stern countenance. He was, indisputably, in a certain style, the handsomest fellow he had ever seen ; the outline was, as he said himself, almost feminine. The tints were those of a rich enamel; and, to crown all, not only had Challys Gray observed him, but he had detected the glasses of the unknown in her direction more than once. It was very provoking. The thought that he had been the person to persuade his fair kinswoman to come here also soured him.

“I don’t know how it is,” he thought, “that fellow has the air of an adventurer—a charlatan.”

As he opened this vein of suspicion, however, he saw Lord Ardenbroke enter the box of the unknown, place his hand with a kind smile gently on the young man’s arm, and shake him by the hand, as he turned about smiling, also. So that suspicion was exploded.

It certainly was Lord Ardenbroke, there could be no mistake about that, and they were chatting together, as it seemed, in a very friendly way.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALFRED DACRE.

"You are *now* pretty sure to be found out," said Charles.

"Has any one come in?" asked Miss Gray.

"Over there," said Charles, with a glance and a little nod, indicating the box at the opposite side.

"Why—what do you mean?" asked Miss Gray, with a slight change of colour.

"Your cousin, Lord Ardenbroke, has just made his appearance, and he's talking to that lady-like young gentleman about whom we so nearly quarrelled just now."

"I don't remember the quarrel, but is Ardenbroke really there?"

She was resolved not to look again in that direction.

"He is really in high chat, and they seemed very glad to see one another."

"If I am to be discovered, there's no one I should rather be found out by; he's so good-natured, and so pleasant."

She almost hoped he might see her and come across, so intensely curious had she become to learn something about that young man. If she could only be certain that he was *not* the writer of the anonymous letter which made her so restless, she would never think of him more. It was that fanciful association that connected him with that disguised communication, that made him so interesting.

In the meantime what had passed between Lord Ardenbroke and the charlatan of Charles's dream, and the avenger of Miss Challys Gray's?

"It's an age since we met," said Lord Ardenbroke.

"Five years—*six* years, so it is. I did not think you could have known me. I hadn't this"—he touched his small peaked beard as he spoke—"and wore my hair long

—do you remember—like young France, and I fancied I was so changed.”

“I never forget a face,” said Lord Ardenbroke. “And how long have you been in this part of the world, and what have you been doing these hundred years?”

“I’ve been all over the world, and doing everything, and I’m here in London upon a very secret affair—diplomatic, shall I say? I can’t tell you yet, I’ll call it a—what?—a secret mission”—he laughed a little—“and I know you’ll not be vexed, but I must ask you to do me this kindness, not to mention that I’ve been here, I mean in this town of yours, to any living creature. I might, I’m quite serious, get into a very awkward scrape, if it were known, and you’ll promise.”

“Certainly; no one shall hear a word of it from me,” said Lord Ardenbroke.

“I see, you don’t know what to make of me,” said this young man, with a smile, perhaps the least degree in the world embarrassed, “but you shall, no one before you; I only wish I could tell you all about

it now, you could give me counsel well worth having, but the truth is, the secret isn't mine—it is quite other people's."

"I shan't say I saw you," said Lord Ardenbroke, with a grave and quiet decision, "but would there be the least use in asking you to come to us to-morrow?"

"No," said the young man, with a smile and a shake of the head, "nothing would give me greater pleasure, but I can't go anywhere."

"Well, I was afraid you couldn't, from what you said; but you'll be coming back, I hope, soon, more your own master, and then I'll not let you off."

The young man smiled and thanked him.

"I've given up music, except my own miserable singing, for my private entertainment (he laughed), for years. I used to live in the opera, but one changes."

"You draw, and paint still, of course?"

"No, I've given that up also; one tires of everything at last, except—there's one pursuit I still do enjoy. I studied Lavater, you remember, or you forget, but I did, and

I think it an inexhaustible science, and I've been exercising my craft on a face this evening, and it has rather interested me."

"Oh! and where is this face?"

"Over there."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Lord Ardenbroke, looking in the direction of Miss Gray's box, "I'm so glad! why that's——"

"Don't tell me who, pray, just for a moment; she's good-looking, as we all see."

"Very."

"She's agreeable."

"Yes."

"And altogether, you'd say of her, she's——"

"Charming."

"Ha! she's worth punishing."

"How? What do you mean?"

"Am I to speak quite plainly, in my character as philosopher, physiognomist, psychologist?"

"By all means."

"Well, that girl's a devil."

"Isn't that very strong?" and Lord Ardenbroke laughed a little.

"I mean it; I could show you the lines and proportions in that, I may say, lovely face that quite settle the point; she is a fiend if you place her in certain relations."

"What sort of fiend?"

"Cruel."

"You are quite wrong," said Lord Ardenbroke.

The physiognomist laughed.

"You are, I assure you."

"That's because you fancy that cruelty and malice are inseparable. She has no malice, and yet she is diabolically cruel. Recollect, I know absolutely nothing of her past life, and nothing of her character except what my art reveals. But that art is infallible, you'll find I'm right."

"I shall be very sorry," said Lord Ardenbroke with a smile, "and till then I must venture to question your mode of divination."

"You don't fancy that the people who burnt heretics in Smithfield, were more ill-natured than others; they were simply stupid on a certain point—now *there's* a face quite

beautiful, but it shows a capability, not a habit, of intense narrowness, intense obstinacy, and intense violence — she has imagination also. She might be in certain situations a character bigoted and terrible. There are fine qualities also—very, but I shan't trouble you with them. But, because she has so many fine attributes, I repeat, she is worth punishing. Who is she?"

There was a slight tension of features, as if a screw tightened. While putting the question he fixed his dark eyes on Lord Ardenbroke.

That nobleman looked a little put out, and said, as carelessly as he could—

"That young lady is a cousin of mine, Miss Gray of Gray Forest."

"Really, how odd! The moment I looked at her, the thought struck me, that she was one of that family. It is a name that always strikes me with pain when I hear it. I sometimes think they had reason to complain, but that's an old story now, and I shan't disturb it. She's very pretty, and unless I mistake, she will take very

good care of herself. I have fifty things to ask you, but not here. I know where to find you, and you'll allow me to look in on you?"

"Only too happy, and remember, you really must. I'm going now to that box over the way—I have not seen her for such a time."

"Shall I introduce you?" whispered the young man to his elderly companion, with an arch and bitter smile. The man of the long white head replied by slightly hitching his shoulder and turning a degree more away, his eyes still fixed on the remote prompter's box, while a shadow of displeasure gathered on his face, and he muttered some inaudible monologue to himself.

It was a mere whisper, and having uttered it, the young man, still smiling, gave his hand again to Lord Ardenbroke, who bid him good-bye, and vanished.

"You knew verra well I did not want to be introduced, what for should I?" said the old man, with traces of a Scotch accent,

grimly, and without turning. "What for should I?"

"How should I know? He might be of use to you."

The young man seemed to enjoy his friend's uneasiness.

"And the way you talk—the questions you ask at him, and the things you do, I'd say ye were daft, and I tell ye plainly, sir, I don't understand it," said the old man, turning and looking full at him for a moment.

"Understand it—of course you don't."

"No; you young men, if ye were a bit more steady and less conceited, ye'd be nothing the worse o't," said the gray man sternly.

"Cautious, cautious, but don't you know that rashness is often the highest caution?"

"I know nothing o' the kind."

"I have my own ideas about it," said the young man. "I say with Monsieur Danton—*l'audace, encore l'audace, toujours l'audace!*"

"And if I wanted to speak with Lord

Ardenbroke," continued his elderly companion, "what for shouldn't I, without ceremony, for I ha' spoken with him sayveral times, it will be eight years since, and upon business of his own, confidential business, but I've no desire to renew the acquaintance, and if I had, ye'll understand, I should consider the present, sir, a vera inopportune time for ony such purpose."

"Don't call me *sir*, pray call me by my name," said the young man.

"Well, well, Mr. Dacre, *there*, and as I am acting with you, Mr. Dacre, I take the liberty of reminding you, sir, that business is business, and I see no room for trifling here."

"None in the world—quite the contrary, by Jove. I quite agree with you," answered Dacre.

"I came here to inform ye, with precision, on one or two points."

"And so you have—admirably."

"And I tauld ye somebody would recognise ye; ye should a sat more back, and held a bit o' playbill or something before your face."

“Or worn a paper nose and a pair of spectacles. But seriously, I had not an idea he could have known me after so long a time, for I *am* very *much* altered.”

“And ye needn’t have talked so long with him; he’s vera well known, and I saw other folk with spy-glasses turned this way, while he was here.”

“Well, they didn’t hurt us, and what for shouldn’t I hae a crack wi’ the Lord after sae mony years?” said Dacre, with a mimicry of the Scottish dialect.

“It needn’t have been so long,” said the gray man, accepting the phrase in good faith.

“And now, to change the subject. In a quarter of an hour this opera will be over, and then comes the ballet, and I mean to leave this in exactly five minutes,” said Dacre, and he looked at his watch.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ADVENTURE.

IN the meantime, in Miss Laura Challys Gray's box, another greeting had taken place, and after some talk, unnecessary to set down here, Lord Ardenbroke said—

“And so you think my friend very distinguished-looking, and — what else — I forget?”

“Yes, I think he is—and, I said, fierce, sinister sometimes; and you are to answer me two questions,” she said.

“You are curious, then?”

“Yes, a little; that is—very, and you *must* tell me.”

“Well, I'll tell you,” said Lord Ardenbroke. “He's good-natured—he's agreeable—he's always in good spirits—he's very good

company, and—I really think that is everything.”

“Does he live in London?”

“He lives all over the world, I believe.”

“Is he an artist?”

“Oh dear, no—except for his amusement.”

“And what has he come here about?”

“He has come here, he says, upon political business; that’s his own account of it; but there may be some other mixed in it; in fact, I should be very much surprised if there was any public business in it whatever.”

“Well, you must answer one question. Isn’t he a very revengeful person?”

Miss Challys Gray was trying to spell out some clue to the author of her anonymous letter.

Lord Ardenbroke laughed.

“That’s a thing which might be very easily hidden. He was an intimate acquaintance, not an intimate friend, do you see?—very different thing. I have had no experience of him in any other way; he has had quarrels like other people—a good many; but one does not often know who is

in the right, and who altogether in the wrong; and the truth is, except of his lighter qualities, I have had little or no experience of him."

"And now you are to tell me: is he a relation of De Beaumirail's?"

"Let me consider. Isn't this a very severe cross-examination? Well, yes, this much I am sure of—he *is* related to *relations* of De Beaumirail, and"—he laughed merrily—"I should be very much flattered if any young lady were to make such particular inquiries about me."

"Has he an antipathy to Guy de Beaumirail?"

"I know hardly anything of him, I told you, except what I've said; but I never heard of anything of the kind."

"And what's his name?"

"You're not to ask me."

"Not ask his name!"

"No," said Lord Ardenbroke, laughing, as he shook his head.

"Oh, this is quite too absurd. You promised to answer two questions."

"I didn't, though—no, indeed."

"Oh! yes, you did, and you must. What is his name?"

"I can only say the same thing; I can't tell it; I mustn't."

He looked at her, laughing.

"Why not?"

"There's no particular reason, except that I promised, only five minutes ago. He doesn't choose anyone to know that he's here, and he *made* me promise—I'm quite serious."

"Well, will you do me a kindness?"

"Only name it."

"You must go and get his leave just to tell *one* person who will not repeat it to any other creature living."

"But wont that be putting you in a very interesting light? What is he to think?"

"I didn't think of that. But Charles, here—he can tell you."

"But he'll be bound to secrecy, just as I am, and you, still in the dark, and—just look there—there's no use in debating it

further, for they have left their box, and, perhaps, I shan't see him again during his stay in town."

Yes, the box was empty, and Miss Laura Challys Gray was vexed. She had been so near, she fancied, obtaining a key to the puzzle that excited her curiosity and her fears, and now, perhaps, she should never know.

Lord Ardenbroke took his leave. Then followed a listless interval—nearly a quarter of an hour—before the curtain went down.

"Shall we stay for the ballet?" asked Miss Gray of her chaperon.

"Well, I'm a little tired," said Mrs. Wardell.

"And I'm very tired," answered Miss Gray.

"Then, I'm afraid it has disappointed you?" said Charles.

"It's very good—and the tenor quite angelic, and that basso wonderful—but somehow I haven't enjoyed it. I don't know; I haven't been in spirits."

"You were talking to Ardenbroke about that man with the get-up, after Mario. Had he much to say about him?"

"No—next to nothing."

He fancied that a faint tinge of crimson stole to her cheeks as she answered his question.

"Nor even about the old man?" asked Charles, who was a little surly.

"I did not think of that, it is very true; if we knew all about *him* it might throw a light——"

How ridiculous, and even coarse, this eagerness about a total stranger! thought Charles Mannering—throw a light indeed; what stuff!

A few minutes later, having seen the ladies into their carriage, and bid good night at the window, Charles lighted his cigar, not in a cheerful temper, and walked away towards his lodging, through streets already very nearly deserted, while Miss Gray's brougham drove at a rapid pace towards Guildford House.

The adventures of that night, however, were not yet over.

Turning the corner of a street, at a rapid pace, the off horse, young and fresh, swerved a little, the wheel struck one of those iron posts that guard the flagway, and in an instant one of the horses was lying on the pavement, and the other plunging furiously ; Mrs. Wardell screaming, while the carriage rocked most uncomfortably.

The door was, however, opened almost instantly, and not by her footman, whose descent from the box was delayed by the plunging of the horses. It was the handsome unknown of the opera who opened the door. By the light of the carriage lamps she had seen this tall slender figure approaching from the front, and recognised him in his loose coat. The fine eyes and oval face, also, were not to be mistaken.

It *was* he who held the door open and assisted Miss Gray to alight. He led her to the pathway with as ceremonious a respect as heroes in fairy tales lead their princesses, leaving Mrs. Wardell to the care of the servant, who had, by this time, got to the ground.

"You're not hurt, I hope?"

"No—she wasn't hurt."

"You can't stay here till your carriage and horses are ready; it may be a very long wait; my carriage," he said, "is quite at your disposal; shall I tell your servant that he is to attend you home, and your friend? I wish it was more comfortable."

As the coachman reported something amiss with the harness, and a possible delay, the stranger's offer was accepted, the two ladies got in, and he shut the door; Miss Gray's servant got up beside the driver, and away they went.

CHAPTER X.

A FEW WORDS IN THE HALL.

As they drove homeward Miss Gray was silent, but her thoughts were happier. There was even a little excitement that was pleasant. Did this heroic looking young man interest her independently of all theories about the nameless letter or the diamond locket, about which her conjectures grew more and more confused?

Here she was, sitting in his carriage, a very nice one—pretty, elegant even—and utterly in the dark as to who or what he was—longing to know—with nothing but a moveable sheet of glass between her and the coachman, who could relate everything about him, and, yet, still in the dark, without a conjecture as to how she was ever to

learn more than the generalities she had collected from Ardenbroke.

At last she said to Mrs. Wardell—

“Did you remark the young man who was so kind about lending us his carriage; I mean, did you recognise him as the same who sat with an ugly old man at the opera, nearly opposite to us?”

“Yes, to be sure; I could not recollect it was the very person.”

“I’ve been wondering who he is; he’s a friend of Ardenbroke’s; but Ardenbroke would not tell me who he is, and we must make it all out; you are to manage that, mind, when we get home; you can see the servant and ask him whether our horse was much hurt, or anything you please, only you must learn the name of his master.”

“Very good, my dear; suppose you tell Mrs. Rumble to get him some supper, and to make out everything while he is eating it; and I can call him into the dining-room first, so that you shall have time to give Rumble her instructions.”

This little plot was hardly completed when they reached the gate of Guildford House. It was thrown open. The carriage lamps flashed on the knotted trunks of the old elms, as they flew by, and with a sudden sweep they drew up at the steps.

The plan, so artfully contrived, however, broke down before it was so much as set in motion; for the door was again opened by the handsome young man who owned the carriage. He assisted the ladies, in turn, to alight, and Miss Gray with only a little bow, and "We are very much obliged," ran up the steps, and disappeared, leaving Mrs. Wardell to deal with the stranger.

"Wont you come in? pray do," said the old lady.

This handsome cavalier might have assumed this invitation to mean precisely so much as similar hospitalities so offered do mean, and no more. Even Mrs. Wardell, curious as she had become—and what passion is more unscrupulous than curiosity?—was at her wit's end to find a decent pretext for

urging him to come into the house at such an hour, had he hesitated.

But this difficulty did not occur, for he instantly availed himself of her invitation.

He followed her into the hall, and said, "I could not deny myself the honour of coming in, just to receive from your own lips the assurance that you and your young friend were not hurt."

"Hurt! well I do hope not injured, but shaken—shaken a good deal, and—and our nerves—you can understand—but no serious injury."

"I'm so happy to hear you say so; and would it be very impertinent to ask leave to call to inquire to-morrow? My name is Dacre; your servant mentioned that the young lady is Miss Gray, of Gray Forest. I knew, at one time, some of her relations, and I shall do myself the honour to call."

And thus speaking, with a bow that was graceful, as well as stately and grave, he took his leave; and in another minute was

driving rapidly in the direction from which he had come.

"He's coming to-morrow," said Mrs. Wardell, who repaired forthwith to Laura Gray's room, very purple, and very much out of breath, "and his name is Dacre ; and I think him one of the very most agreeable and elegant young men I ever saw ; and he knew some of your people long ago, and he was so kind, and anxious, and attentive."

"Oh! coming here? How odd! And why is he coming here?" asked Laura, very gravely.

"To inquire—to ask how we are; he couldn't well do less, he's *so* polite!"

"Dacre—I *think* I recollect the name, but I'm not sure. Well, he'll call; do you intend seeing him?"

"I see no reason why I shouldn't, merely to tell him how we are," answered Mrs. Wardell.

"No, there's no reason," acquiesced Laura Gray, slowly; "did he come into the house?"

"Yes; just to the hall, but merely to inquire, and ask leave to call to-morrow, which, of course, I could not refuse; but it may be merely a call at the hall door, you know."

"Very likely. *Dacre*? Do you remember the name among friends or acquaintance of ours?"

"He only said that he once knew relations of yours. No; I can't say I do," answered Mrs. Wardell.

Laura Gray was sitting before her glass, in her dressing-gown, with her fine hair loose about her shoulders. She leaned back in her chair.

"You'll take a little tea, wont you? I should like some. Get tea, Noel."

And her maid glided away.

"*Dacre*?" repeated Laura, thinking. "I saw him, I told you, at the opera; but distance, you know—and—I don't know how it is, but people do look different in such places. Did he look like a singer, or an actor, when you saw him near—in the house?"

"Not at all; he looked just like anyone else, only very handsome, and distinguished," answered the old lady.

"And what of his manners?"

"Perfect," said Mrs. Wardell, decisively.

"He seems to have made a very agreeable impression," said Laura, smiling, and relapsed into thought. "Dacre, I cannot recall it; yet I feel as if I ought to remember it. And what hour is he to call?"

"He did not say; and if he asks to come in I don't see why I shouldn't see him," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Ardenbroke will be here to-morrow, I'm certain. What fun if he and Mr. Dacre happened to meet here after all their mystery to-night," said Miss Gray.

So they continued to chat together till it was time to say good night, and old Mrs. Wardell went away.

Then Laura Gray, having also despatched her maid, unlocked her desk, and took out the mysterious letter and the diamond locket.

Just as that glimmering circle flashed

suddenly and steadily on her eye, had the conviction gleamed on her mind that the person whom she saw that night in the box with that long-headed old man, was the author of the letter which she now scanned with an excited interest. As she read, the image of the young man, as he appeared for a moment before her, when her glass had lighted upon him unawares—was before her, handsome, sinister, watching. As she read, still she saw that faint, stern smile, that seemed to imply a mutual understanding—shadowed unpleasantly before her.

And now, what did her evidence amount to? Simply to this smile and this intuition. A case of shadows. And yet this intuition continued, and the smile abated not. A painful impression—a persistent phantom—that followed her to her bed—and showed still through the filmy curtain of her eyelid.

CHAPTER XI.

DE BEAUMIRAIL'S AMBASSADOR.

EARLY next day, about eleven o'clock, Miss Gray was among her flowers with hoe and rake, and a pair of those rough, gauntlet-shaped gloves, with which ladies protect their hands in such operations, and a small boy assisting, and to-ing and fro-ing on errands, and often on his knees grubbing in the mould.

The sun shone out pleasantly, the tufted foliage of the old trees cast soft shadows on the grass; and yielding to indolence, and inspired by the quietude of the miniature scene, she dropped her trowel, and seated herself on her garden chair, at first watching the labours of the boy, who was working away among the weeds and flowers. But her thoughts soon carried her elsewhere.

One subject had begun to engross her mind. It engaged it last at night, and first in the morning, and haunted her incessantly.

The little diamond locket she wore about her neck, hidden inside her dress, she now drew forth, and looked at the rich brown hair it contained with a pang of bitter remembrance. She brooded over that sad history with a commiseration that deepened into rage. "Thank God," she murmured, "I never faltered—it is my duty to be firm."

She replaced the locket so mysteriously acquired, and raised her eyes.

The shorn grass under the windows was cut into flower-beds, glowing and glaring all over with masses of blossom.

The double row of elms leading down to the gate was at her left, some equally tall and spreading trees stood at intervals by the lane side, lilacs and laburnums made an underwood, and the wall had a thick mantle of ivy.

Gliding with slow, long paces from under

the deep shadow, in which the noble elms at her left enveloped the short avenue, emerged from between their trunks, upon the grass, the old clergyman whom she had dismissed so summarily on the day after her arrival at Guildford House.

It was on the whole with a compunctious feeling that she saw the old man whom she had dismissed so rudely, approaching her again. She rose, and with a few quick steps hastened to meet him, looking grave, sorrowful, with her hand extended.

He bowed—he timidly extended his hand.

“I’m so much obliged to you for coming to me again. It is very good of you, sir, and I am ashamed of my rudeness, and beg your pardon. I hope you forgive me, sir.” She looked with sad and earnest eyes in his.

“Oh, dear me, I never thought it more than a momentary vexation—pray think of it no more. I took the liberty of calling to beg two or three minutes.”

“Oh, sir! not, I hope, on the same sub-

ject; but whatever it may be, I shall listen with great respect, for I know very well how pure and kind your motive must be, and I am quite ashamed when I think of my ungracious and flippant words. Wont you come into the house?"

"Thank you, ma'am, very much, but a friend who dropped me at the corner will call for me in a very few minutes, and so I had better say what I came to tell you here."

"But, oh! pray do come in. Do, Mr. Parker. I can't think you have quite forgiven me, unless you do. Oh! do, sir, please."

It was one of her fancies, and when an idea took possession of her she was irresistible. The old clergyman found himself, quite against his first intention, in the drawing-room of Guildford House, making his little speech in the cause of humanity, while the listening flowers on the window-stone trembled and nodded. But what effect did he produce where to mould the will would be to unlock the gates of despair?

“It is indeed, ma'am, as you rightly suppose, upon the same subject that I come to speak only a few words, very few, but, I trust, moving words. Yesterday evening Mr. de Beaumirail sent for me. I found him very ill; I found him in despair. In that miserable place, among the other prisoners, is a clever but unfortunate physician, who has been there for more than ten years. As I left Mr. de Beaumirail I met this gentleman, Dr. Wiley, on the stairs, and he turned and walked down with me, and said he, ‘I observe that you visit Mr. de Beaumirail. I went into his room to pay my respects this morning, as I do pretty often, and found him ill.’ He used some technical terms which I did not understand, but he made it clear to me that he thought him in in a bad way.”

“Very ill?” said the young lady, growing pale.

“I mean,” answered the clergyman, “in a precarious state of health. Protracted confinement,” he said, “in his present state, might in a short time prove fatal—I mean,

reduce him to such a condition as would render his recovery impossible."

"Oh! sir, isn't this cruel? isn't it *distracting*?" said Laura Gray, piteously wringing her hands. "Why do you urge me on this point? I have not told you half my reasons. I can hardly explain them to myself. You would think me mad. You argue with me as if you thought I acted from simple malice. There is what I told you mingling in it, but there is another feeling, quite different. Sit down for a moment, and let me tell you."

"Dear, dear!" murmured the old man, throwing a weary weight of disappointment into the homely ejaculation.

"Yes, I know by your looks—your tones declare it—you think me, on this point, immovable, and so I am. But listen, it is *not* malice that makes me so. It is this: a feeling, right or wrong, that he is undergoing a punishment that a righteous power has awarded—a punishment that satisfies some equities that I don't fully comprehend. God knows I would set him free if I could.

Is it religion—is it superstition—this awe of an unseen power that terrifies me?"

"You remember my excellent friend, Mr. Larkin, who quoted the blessed words, 'Sick and in prison and ye visited me,' " said the clergyman.

"Oh, yes, I know. I tried, sir, to persuade myself to consent to his liberation. I tell you, Mr. Parker, I *wished* it, but I can't. Those texts don't apply. The Redeemer speaks of those who are his—so entirely his, that in visiting them we visit *him*. Is it not impiety to apply that to a man who never thought of his Redeemer, of heaven, of anything—but himself, and whose prodigality and wickedness, and not his Christian heroism, have placed him where he is? Yet, even so, through mere goodnature, or weakness, or what you will, I should have set him free, but that the idea terrifies me. How can I tell how those who are gone would regard it; how God would view it; and whether I am not, if I give way, yielding not to mercy, but to an evil influence, and sacrificing the claims of affection, and the justice of God, to a base

temptation? I can't define it: my poor sister! I feel it. A horror I can't describe bars my interfering with the course of that hateful tragedy. If I did so I think I should go mad. Oh! sir, don't press me. Spare me, for God's sake, and never mention it again."

The old man looked down, pained, perplexed. He did not know how to argue with a difficulty so unlike the simple vulgarities of revenge and hatred.

The old clergyman sighed deeply, and looked up as if to resume his plea. But she said, anticipating—

"No, sir. Faith may move mountains, but you cannot shake the barrier that rises before my will. I could as easily persuade you to deny your Lord, as you could me to violate that awful conviction."

He bowed, and in a minute more took his leave. She walked down the stairs with him in silence, and from the hall door upon the grass, and, walking a few steps beside him, she said—

"I wonder whether M. de Beaumirail

has an enemy called Dacre? Can you make out?—a young man called Dacre? and I will, if you think he wants money—I would tell Mr. Gryston to place a sum in your hands for his use. But more than that is impossible.”

CHAPTER XII.

DE PROFUNDIS.

THAT same morning Lord Ardenbroke had, among his other letters, one that served to amuse him. It was from the handsome young man who had so much engaged the curiosity of the party in Miss Gray's box.

It was very short: only a few lines.

"Alfred Dacre—You are a very odd fellow, Alfred Dacre," was all his commentary; and with a smile, and a little shrug, he proceeded to read his other letters.

Later in the day he paid a visit at Guildford House, and saw the ladies there; and when he was going away, Miss Laura Gray said to him:—

"I forgot to tell you I've made out

your friend's name—I mean the mysterious person in the peaked beard at the opera.”

“Oh! really?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure that you don’t mean to lead me into betraying it—you young ladies are so deep,” said he laughing.

“No, really; I do know it.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Dacre,” she said triumphantly.

“How did you make it out?”

“You shan’t hear.”

“Do tell me—pray do?”

“That’s *my* secret,” she replied, shaking her pretty head with a smile.

“But I have a reason, really,” said Lord Ardenbroke, a little earnestness mixing in his manner.

“You shan’t hear—positively no. You refused me that harmless little confidence, and now you demand to learn my secrets; not a word.”

He laughed again, and there ensued a silence, and he was very grave for a minute. Then said he, looking up with a faint smile:

"Well, since you wont tell, I can't help it. But—but you must remember, you did not hear it from *me*—that's all."

"Certainly not from you," acquiesced Laura.

This little dialogue was spoken standing, and after he had taken his leave—a ceremony which he now repeated, and ran down the stairs.

By this time the good old clergyman had reached the melancholy room of De Beaumirail, within the precincts of the Fleet.

In his dressing-gown, the prisoner leaned back upon his faded red sofa, having pitched the novel with which he had been striving to kill the weary hour, on the floor, on which it lay open. Pale and weary he looked; and the hand that lay on the arm of the sofa was slowly fumbling over the brass heads of the nails, as a friar tells his beads in a vigil.

He nodded, without rising, without smiling, as the old man entered.

"I hope, my young friend," said he, "I

have 'not taken a liberty. I have availed myself of a seat in a friend's brougham to go out to Old Brompton. I've been, unsuccessfully, again at Guildford House. I have seen Miss Gray; but with respect to the object of terminating this miserable confinement, as I say, unsuccessfully."

De Beaumirail's face lighted up with a sudden interest: he sat erect: and his finger's-tip ceased its monotonous course along the dingy nail-heads, as the old man spoke.

"Yes, Nemesis, very good," he said, with a faint sour smile. "I am sorry, Mr. Parker, you gave yourself the trouble to come all this way to tell me that—I can't call it news. Very kind of you, though," he added, recollecting himself.

"But though she wont do that," resumed the clergyman, "she is very willing—to—assist—in fact, if you required money—if you were at all distressed——"

"Give me money," interrupted Beaumirail with a very angry laugh. "Do you mean to say she seriously offered to give me

money? That is pretty near the climax, I should hope, of her insolence. I've been here three years and seven weeks. She has only to write her name, as she does to every note she sends to her heartless acquaintances—to every order she writes to her jeweller or her milliner—and without costing her a shilling—and I should be free, and the malignant little fool wont do it. Offer me money indeed. Dying here by inches! As if it were not slow and miserable enough, she'd eke out my agony a little longer, and buy the gratifying spectacle of my protracted torture by a few judicious doles. I wish I had heard her make that offer; I'd have answered—insult for insult, by heaven! But I can hardly believe it. It is not credible. Look at me here, sir; I'm not a man who can associate with the swindlers and charlatans and bankrupts, the scum of society, who are here. To me it is literal isolation—what in your convict prisons they call solitary confinement—and no brain could stand it long. If that merciless girl could keep me living

until I went mad—what a complete revenge?”

“Pardon me, sir; it is not revenge——”

“Not revenge! And what the devil is it?”

“It is a feeling—a kind of——”

“A kind of hypocrisy, sir—throwing dust in your eyes. If it reached you as it does me—your person, your health, your brain—you’d not be the dupe of a few fine phrases. The stupid little fiend does not know the danger she is drifting into. This morning I thought the whole thing over. I don’t despair yet. I shall have my chance. She likes revenge—she’ll pursue it; let her. I’ve been passive too long. I hope and believe I may never die until I see her pride humbled and her heart broken by my skill and resolution.”

“Wild words, sir,” said the clergyman, sadly shaking his head.

“Wild words—wild thoughts—wild *works*! Sir, you shall see. I have thought over a possible revenge, sir, which would outdo hers. I have not put it in motion—a

foolish compunction worried me to-day. I dare say I should never have tried my game if she had acted with common humanity. She has driven me to despair, and let her take the consequences."

"There, there, pray, Mr. de Beaumirail. You know I ought not to hear all that without reproof; but there are excuses. You are excited—you are suffering; reflection will come, and the storm will subside of itself."

De Beaumirail laughed impatiently and harshly. He was no longer sitting, but walking in his slippers about the room; and without arresting his march he said—

"Ho! I'm carried away by a sudden gust. I'm to subside, and sit down as heretofore. By Jove, sir, you mistake me. Cold and hard as a block of ice, sir. You came just in the nick of time to decide a vacillating man. Your benevolent message, sir, has settled a very critical question for Miss Laura Challys Gray."

"Sir, may I ask you do you know a Mr. Dacre?" inquired the clergyman.

"Dacre—Alfred Dacre? I do, or rather I did," said De Beaumirail, stopping short and looking hard at the old man; "I don't know whether he is living still—do you?"

"No, sir, no; but may I ask whether he was an enemy of yours."

"Yes; about the worst enemy I ever had, and that's saying a good deal. And now tell me where you heard him mentioned."

"Miss Gray asked me to put the question I have asked to you."

"Miss Gray! Did she? Come, come, that looks oddly. Surely she said something that indicated whether he was alive or dead?"

"No; she did not say."

"Will you be so kind," said De Beaumirail, with a sudden change of manner, and an air of great interest, sitting down again in his former place, "to repeat, as nearly as you can recollect it, exactly what she did say?"

The clergyman complied—as it was very easy to do.

"And that was all?"



“ Yes.”

“ You’re sure ? ”

“ I think so.”

De Beaumirail fell into a reverie, and seemed pleased. He looked up with an odd smile.

“ In that quarter,” he said, “ I don’t think he’ll do me much mischief. I suppose he is alive ; wretches like him never die. Can you tell me this—did she evince any interest in that person ! ”

“ I can’t say she did—not the least. She seemed to fancy that he was an enemy of yours. She asked the question gravely, and seemed curious.”

“ H’m. All I say is, I think she’s cleverer than I gave her credit for ; I should like to know what her mind’s working upon.”

With these latter words he fixed his eyes rather cunningly upon the old man. If he fancied, however, that he had any secret to reveal, the simplicity and good faith that looked out of his grave, old blue eyes laid that suspicion at rest.

“ Clever, cruel, vindictive ; she’d pierce

me with her bodkin. I carry as good a dagger—it is combat to the outrance ; recollect I never sought it. It is her doing. I hate it, and it will be her misfortune, *perhaps*—I can't help it."

"I make excuses, as I said, Mr. de Beau-mirail, for the angry language you employ. When next I see you, I shall find you, I trust, in a happier, at least a more resigned temper. You must excuse me also, when I say that you seem to forget, when you utter menaces like those, how powerless you are to accomplish them."

"That's hitting me where you shouldn't, Mr. Parker. It ain't fair, or generous. Quite true I'm locked up here—I don't need to be reminded—but have you never heard or read of magicians who sat in their infernal laboratories, among their elixirs, and their books, as dark and sequestered as this place, and plagued the people they hated, ever so far away, by their art? Beautiful they say she is, as other witches have been. She has drawn her circle round me here, and here I commence, at last, my incantations, and by

heaven she shall feel them. It is a contest in which the time is past for relenting. I wish—I wish I knew whether Dacre is living, and in England. If he be, it is hardly a fair fight.”

“There was a time, Mr. Beaumirail, when I had reason to hope that you had gathered the fruits of a good experience from your affliction—but—but your present tone and conversation disappoint me.”

“I wont argue it any more than your friend Miss Gray will. I accept her version of charity, and her laws of war. I hesitate no longer, and I leave you, sir, a year to guess, and her to feel. Now from this den I shall weave my spells about her.”

CHAPTER XIII.

TEA.

THERE was disappointment at Guildford House, for the day had closed without bringing the expected visit of Mr. Dacre. Of that gentleman Miss Gray knew nothing, and yet there was an odd feeling or mortification in her mind, by reason of this unimportant neglect. Mrs. Wardell's disappointment was now outspoken.

"If he had not proposed it, I should not have thought so much of it, although it would have been no more than a decent civility to have called and inquired for us to-day, under all the circumstances. But really, after his making such a flourish of trumpets about it, there's no excuse; and I can view it in no other light than as a most ill-bred omission."

It was dark now, but Miss Laura Gray chose the shutters and the curtains open, and liked, in twilight and moonlight, the look-out upon the circumscribed but singular little landscape, and, looking listlessly from the window, she said, "A lonely pair of women, we are this evening. Even Charles Mannering has failed us."

"Yes, my dear Laura, don't you see? this way of living is so intolerably dull that——"

"Hush, a moment. The gate has opened, and, yes, here is a carriage," said Miss Gray.

There were lights in the drawing-room, and she drew back as a brougham with a pair of horses approached at a rapid pace.

"Dear me, who can it be?" said old Mrs. Wardell, getting up and hesitating. "It can't be Ardenbroke back again, nor Charles Mannering in a carriage, and it is such a very odd hour—can it be possible—there's the knock; can it be Mr. Dacre, at such an hour?"

"It must be some one, and one visitor is nearly as odd as another," said Miss Gray.

"I—I don't know—should I go down at such an hour?" faltered Mrs. Wardell.

"Go down, certainly, you'll see him, and do precisely as you and I planned. You are to do just as you would if it were three o'clock in the afternoon — there's the hall-door open."

"Oh, dear, so it is! but the idea of bringing him up here."

"I don't say you are to take him by the collar and bring him up here, whether he will or no, but if you find him so disposed let him come up, and take some tea."

"But, my dear, it's nine o'clock."

"I don't care; curiosity must be satisfied first, decorum afterwards; don't dispute."

The door opened—the servant entered.

"Mr. Dacre's compliments, ma'am, and wishes to know particularly how you and Miss Gray are this evening?"

This was addressed to Mrs. Wardell.

"Is it a messenger?" inquired Miss Laura Gray.

It was Mr. Dacre himself.

The young lady glanced at Mrs. Wardell,

and found Mrs. Wardell glancing at her. Their eyes met, and Miss Laura Gray smiled in spite of herself.

"I think, dear, you had better see Mr. Dacre for a moment," said she to Mrs. Wardell.

Preternaturally grave, Mrs. Wardell arose, and told the servant to show Mr. Dacre into the library, and, after a glance in the mirror, she followed him downstairs.

Now, Miss Laura Challys Gray listened harshly, biting her under lip with a tiny edge of her pearly teeth, and smiling. "He'll come, of course he'll come—that face is full of the spirit of adventure, and I must say that old Wardell and I are behaving very indiscreetly, but it's only for once, and I really could not allow him to escape—ha, is he coming or going? No. What is old Wardell saying, I wonder?" and she laughed quietly in spite of all she could do.

"I suppose we are behaving very oddly. What, I wonder, would my sober cousin, Charles Mannering, say of us, if he happened

to drop in, and—here—here—yes ; here they come.”

So it was, and, with a sudden reaction, her spirits sank, and she would gladly have been anywhere else. She had just time to place herself in her easy chair again, when the half-closed door opened, and good old Mrs. Wardell entered in high chat with the stranger.

There was no mistaking him. The handsome hero of the opera was before her ; the oval face and small peaked beard ; the delicate mouth and moustache, and the great singular eyes, which lighted upon her with a sudden and gloomy splendour that startled her.

A stately, very low bow he made her, as Mrs. Wardell said—

“ This is Mr. Dacre, my dear, you remember, who was so kind as to lend us his carriage ; he has been so good as to call to inquire, and I asked him to come up.”

“ I asked Mrs. Wardell’s leave, yesterday, which she was good enough to give me. I have to make my apologies, however, for

calling at so awkward an hour ; but I was detained by business, from which I could not escape, in the country, and returning this way I could not deny myself, late as it is, the honour of calling to learn how you were."

"We are so much obliged ; quite well. We have quite got over our little fright, and we had no idea what a service you had done us till this morning. We should have been delayed more than an hour."

Mr. Dacre seemed very much pleased. He was very handsome : it was pleasant to see him pleased. But there was, or Miss Gray fancied it, something ever so slight that was bitter and cynical in the stealthy gaze with which he watched her as she spoke. But there was the smile, and there were those splendid eyes, dark and fiery. Where was this sinister light ? Where were those lines and curves of cruelty which gave, in her eyes, to his beauty an anguine and dangerous character—subtle, sinuous, baleful ?

His bow had been ceremonious and very

grave; but there remained not the least trace of stateliness in his air, or countenance; he was chatting now very easily and gaily. He addressed Mrs. Wardell for the most part, but Laura Gray thought his conversation was intended for her. He was going now. He had set down his tea-cup. He had just told them a very odd story, which turned on an anonymous letter, the author of which, by a curious combination of evidence, he had discovered.

“Had fortune placed me in the detective service, I dare say I should have risen to be an eminent catch-thief; I should almost embrace the profession for the pleasure of tracing up that sort of villainy to its source.”

The story was well told and very curious. Miss Laura Challys Gray listened to it with that kind of attention which is observant, if not suspicious, of the relator himself, as well as curious about the narrative. Her fancy, that he might be the author of the letter with the locket enclosed, had fast melted away. That Mr. Dacre was an early

intimate of Ardenbroke's and that Ardenbroke should have spoken of him as he did, were reassuring circumstances. But Mr. Dacre's manners were winning, respectful, and quite charming, and now, by one of those chances that establish or overthrow a theory in a moment, he had lighted upon the very subject, and had spoken of that kind of treachery with a point and bitterness which ended all controversy.

His visit was not altogether a quarter of an hour, and in those agreeable minutes they had grown to feel so curiously intimate, as if they had known him for years.

"We are very lonely here, Mr. Dacre; but if you would sometimes look in upon a very dull house it would be good-natured of you," said Mrs. Wardell, at parting.

"I am only too much honoured; nothing would give me so much pleasure; but I'm so unfortunate, my stay in this part of the world is so very uncertain, and I'm obliged to go twelve miles out of town every morning, to meet people on business, and there my whole day is unavoidably passed, and I

never get away, in fact, earlier than I did this evening."

There was a little pause here; Miss Gray fancied it seemed to invite a repetition of the same hospitality, so did Mrs. Wardell, who stole a little glance at Laura, and seeing in her face nothing to discourage she said—

"If you happened to be passing again to-morrow evening, and would come in and take some tea, it is probable that our cousin, Mr. Mannering—do you know him?—may be here."

"You are very kind; I shall be most happy, but, may I venture to tell you the business which detains me for some little time in London is, as I explained to Lord Ardenbroke, of a nature that makes it desirable, and almost necessary, that I should not be known to be here; such are my instructions, as I may call them; and in fact it might defeat the object of my visit, which is of some importance, if I were seen, or if my name were so much as mentioned as having been seen in London; I should,

therefore, as a matter of conscience and honour to others deeply interested in my mission, avoid meeting any one who might disclose the fact of my being here. I am telling you quite frankly how I am circumstanced. I also confess that I can't resist the temptation of coming, and throw myself on your mercy to spare me the risk, I may say, the serious injury of being recognised."

"Certainly, Mr. Dacre, you may depend upon it, I shan't endanger your incognito," said Mrs. Wardell.

Had her curiosity been a degree less, Miss Gray would have interposed, I think, and suggested that, considering the circumstances, it would hardly be fair to ask Mr. Dacre to run a risk, and so have withdrawn the slight invitation.

But a new theory had shaped itself in her mind, and till this new conjecture was either established or overthrown she could find no rest.

That old, ugly, harsh face, the long gray head, that had appeared beside Dacre in the box at the opera. Was its owner a kinsman

of his? Could he be the writer of the anonymous letter that troubled her with an hourly increasing fever? Might not he be that connecting link, the relation of Dacre, also a relation of De Beaumirail's—and Ardenbroke had described that degree of connexion between Dacre and Beaumirail; and could she rest till that guess at least were answered?

That hard, white head, might hold no end of ugly schemes. And was there not in the letter something of the pedantry of old age lecturing youth.

She would sift this speculation to its conclusion if possible, and therefore the acquaintance of Mr. Dacre must be cultivated, and from him, ultimately, she might secure its solution.

Mr. Dacre took his leave, and his carriage drove away, and, said Miss Gray, suddenly, to her companion—

“My dear Julia Wardell, what have we done? I assure you we are getting on at such a pace. I am quite stunned and hardly know myself.”

"I don't know what you mean," said Mrs. Wardell, with perfect simplicity.

"Here, we have invited a young man—without an introduction—without, in fact, knowing anything about him, except that he is an acquaintance of Ardenbroke's, and given him a sort of promise that he is not to find my cousin, Charles Mannering, here, when he comes to tea. I am annoyed at myself; what will Ardenbroke think of us—what must Mr. Dacre think of us?"

"I'm not the least uncomfortable about it. We have every reason to conclude that he is an unexceptionable acquaintance, and I really can't see, considering that I am here to take care of you, the slightest oddity in asking him to take a cup of tea here."

"It *is* odd—I *know* it's odd—so do you; and what a ridiculous termination to those plans of seclusion I had formed. How Charles Mannering and Ardenbroke will laugh! And I really think, with your experience, you ought to guard me against such absurd mistakes."

This was certainly unreasonable, considered as an attack upon Mrs. Wardell, who had simply done what Miss Gray, could she have been secretly consulted, would have insisted upon. But is it not always pleasant to lay a part of our burdens upon other shoulders, and the entire pack, even, if it be practicable?

Mrs. Wardell was huffed, and she said—

“There has been no mistake, and nothing odd; but as you fancy there is, we can easily arrange to go to tea to-morrow evening to poor old Lady Ardenbroke; you promised Ardenbroke that you would some evening, and it would be a cheer; and I’ll leave our apologies with the servant to say to Mr. Dacre where we were obliged to go, and so we shall get rid of all trouble about him.”

“Yes; perhaps that will do. It is a little awkward, you know,” said Laura.

But Mrs. Wardell did not help her by a single word; thinking, I dare say, that she would not on any account miss Mr. Dacre’s visit.

"Yes," resumed Laura, "I believe that is the best thing we can do."

Another silence followed, but no step was taken, I am bound to confess, to carry out this little evasion, either that evening or next morning.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER VISIT.

NEXT day, at about three o'clock, Charles Mannering looked in. The ladies received him, he thought, a little oddly. Had his cousin heard, he speculated, of the conversation, so urgent and dolorous, with which, yesterday evening, the good clergyman, Mr. Parker, whom he had accidentally met, had favoured him upon the inexhaustible subject of the prisoner De Beaumirail.

True, he was resolved not to open this unwelcome theme again to his cousin, uninvited. But how else was he to account for the perceptible constraint of her manner—the apparent embarrassment, indeed of both ladies, and those long silences that were so unusual in that easy society?

They were not offended with him. There

was no affront, and their looks and manner implied nothing of the kind. But Laura Gray said nothing of "to-day," and invited him instead "to-morrow," to dinner, and seemed put out, and a little vexed, though not with him. And Mrs. Wardell, who was less scrupulous about her yea being strictly yea, and her nay nay, then Miss Gray murmured something about their intending to pass that evening with old Lady Ardenbroke, at which Miss Laura Gray, under her breath, uttered an impatient "oh!" tossing her head with a little glance at Julia Wardell, who returned it with a "h'm!" blushing a little, as her pretty cousin rose and walked to the window.

Altogether, Charles Mannering did not know what to make of them, and went away a great deal sooner than he had intended, more vexed and puzzled than he would have had any other living creature know.

That day moved slowly away. How was this agreeable Mr. Dacre acquiring the sombre influence which he had begun to exercise?

Partly it was due to this, that Miss Gray had resolved that, even at the risk of adding a new item to the eccentricities of their dealing with this stranger, she would, if possible, test his complicity with the author of the letter—if, in truth, he knew anything about it, and should he prove quite innocent, then she would, if need be, cease to trouble him, and drop that singular acquaintance.

Upon this old-fashioned suburb, and throng of tufted trees and old brick houses, the sun went down, and threw his dusky red over the landscape, transforming the steep roofs and chimneys in the distance into fiery domes and minarets, that faded at last in the dark gray twilight.

Tedious were the hours as those which separate the young heir from the glories of his succession, and never did day die so slowly as that one for Laura Gray.

Night came; candles or lamps were lighted in the drawing-room, and the ladies sat there, rather silently, expecting their visitor.

Miss Gray was vexing herself with doubts and scruples. Was the step she was taking

dignified, or even decorous? She could not deceive herself. If it were not for the fancy that he could throw an important light upon the question of the authorship of the letter, she would not have dreamed of inviting Mr. Dacre to tea, and actually getting her kinsman, Charles Mannering, out of the way for the occasion.

“I really am growing quite ashamed again, Julia, as the time approaches, and I almost wish we had not permitted this visit. There’s no use thinking now of it; but we could have got Ardenbroke to bring him here and introduce him, and the thing would then have been quite different.”

“You forget, my dear, that my presence, having been a married woman, and he knows that I am *Mrs.* Wardell—he has called me so—and your kinswoman, is quite sufficient protection; there really is nothing at all odd; and, as you said yourself this morning, he might not choose to come here with Ardenbroke. If Ardenbroke saw him here, and heard us call him by his name, he would conclude that there was no longer any secret

--it was you who thought of that, and of course, Mr. Dacre has thought of it also; and, I don't see any harm, and there really is no harm, and there really is no oddity, in giving that young man a cup of tea, knowing that Ardenbroke knows him so intimately."

"I will suppose you are right, said Laura, listlessly, taking a seat by the open window, through which the soft air was gently stealing.

A carriage drove by, upon that quiet road, and, after a momentary silence, Miss Gray said —

"I don't think he's coming. I dare say he's tired, and gone home; or gone to the opera, perhaps, or anywhere but here; it must be so tiresome, and, somehow, so unmeaning; and, to tell you the truth, I think we should look very like three fools sitting in a circle."

"I don't think any such thing. I think, on the contrary, he's very much taken with you, my dear; and I saw him stealing a look now and then, when he thought neither you nor I observed him. I think his visit

interests him very much, and I never saw anyone more pleased to be invited."

Laura Gray, as she leaned back in her chair, smiled faintly at the carpet before her at these words; and then, raising her head, looked through the open window and the darkened air towards the gate, now invisible.

A carriage had stopped there. And now—yes—the clang of the gate was audible, and two carriage lamps came sailing up the short avenue, under the trees.

Tranquilly Miss Laura Gray leaned back in her low chair, and in a few moments more Mr. Dacre was announced, and came into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Wardell received him very cordially; and Miss Gray, she scarcely knew why, rather coldly.

He sat down and took his cup of tea, and chatted agreeably about all sorts of things. But caparicious Laura Gray was still silently insensible to those secret glances of entreaty and rebuke which good Mrs. Wardell, floundering in the deep, threw upon her.

Perhaps Mr. Dacre fancied that the ladies

had been quarrelling. I don't know. But he could hardly fail to perceive the embarrassment that reigned in the drawing-room.

"One is allowed to admire China, when it is so beautiful as this, and so old," said Alfred Dacre, trying a new subject, as he turned his tea-cup round upon its saucer with the tip of his finger; "and I am sure it has a history."

"I dare say," said Mrs. Wardell, catching at the chance, "you know all about it, Laura."

"Yes, it is very old, I believe," said she; "but I am a very bad chronicler, and, I am ashamed to say, I forget all about it."

Here ensued another silence. Mrs. Wardell looked at her again with wild entreaty.

There was rather a difficulty in finding a subject. Miss Gray, notwithstanding, afforded not the slightest assistance. Mrs. Wardell, whose invention was slow, looked at her now, almost angrily, in vain; and Mr. Dacre perceiving the embarrassment, wondered when the mouse would come forth and the mountain cease to labour.

He talked a little more. But his remarks did not germinate. They were thrown on a barren surface. An inspiration reminded Mrs. Wardell, however, of a letter from her nephew, and she said, "I think I told you, Laura, didn't I? that I had a letter from poor Philip Darwin, my nephew, Mr. Dacre, and he is so miserably in love, I think he'll break his heart, poor fellow. What shall I advise him, Mr. Dacre?"

"I'm a poor authority," said Alfred Dacre, "but love is said to be the business of those who have no business—suppose you find him something to do?"

"Oh! he has plenty to do—he's in a cavalry regiment, and he's breaking his heart, for they think they are going to India."

"Oh! don't be uneasy, he'll cool there rapidly, notwithstanding the climate," said Dacre, smiling.

"Heaven grant it, poor fellow," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Heaven has nothing to do with it, I assure you," said Dacre.

"Why, that sounds very odd—you're not

an Atheist," said Mrs. Wardell, a little brusquely.

"A very complete Atheist. I hardly believe even in Cupid," he replied.

"Oh! I see you are joking, but there is an old saying, my nurse used to quote it," said Mrs. Wardell, "that marriages are made in heaven."

"Over tea-tables, and in drawing-rooms, and by very odd angels, I believe. You see what a sceptic I am. Except as a spectator, however, I know nothing of marriage, and nothing, I may say, of love." He laughed. "As a rule, however, marriage seldom seems quite to restore the human race to Paradise."

"Some people are very happy in that state, Mr. Dacre," said Mrs. Wardell, in a tone and with a look straight before her, meant to convey a sense of the felicity she, at least, had conferred, when in that state.

"Good heaven!" thought Miss Gray. "What can Julia Wardell mean by harping on love and marriage in this absurd way. He will certainly think that she and I have

laid a plan to marry him. It is enough to make one cry."

"Some people—yes, of course," said he, "but our education, I mean that of men, is very much against making love our first, much less our only passion, or marriage our chief source of happiness. We have so many pursuits and ambitions, and amusements, and all so engrossing, I can't pretend to say which mode of making life's journey is the easier—celibacy or wedlock, each has its drawbacks like the two chaises that Miss Edgeworth mentions at the Irish inn, 'the top's out of one, and the bottom's out of the other,'" and he laughed again.

"I can quite understand young men laughing at marriage," said the persistent Julia Wardell, "but not believing in *love*, that does amaze me."

"Oh, but I do believe in it. I'd describe it as an inebriation followed by headache."

"I don't understand you," said Mrs. Wardell.

"That is, in the case of most men. I should be afraid of love, because, with me, it would

be a first and only love, and therefore violent enough to kill." He spoke with a sadness almost enthusiastic, was silent for a moment, and then laughed. "But I have seen lovers, men who belonged to the profession, I may call it, and practised nothing else. I have watched the decline of passion and the veering of fancy. The vision fades, the charm expires, and love goes out. Now I fear the passion, because, with me, it might prove the reverse—a live-long madness. In a case like mine I could suppose something prodigious, I could suppose a man in love with his wife!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Dacre?" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell.

"Yes, that may happen," he said, "because I believe there is nothing that may not happen, although, I allow, it is not likely."

At this point of the dialogue, Miss Laura Gray got up as if she were looking for a book, or a letter, and, having slowly moved to the piano, she consummated the rudeness of the evening, in Mrs. Wardell's opinion,

by playing a piece of grand and melancholy music by Beethoven.

Up got Mr. Dacre, as that terrified lady thought, to leave the room. But, of course, it was with no such intent; on the contrary, he placed himself gently by the piano and listened, it seemed, in a kind of rapture.

CHAPTER XV.

BEETHOVEN.

WHEN the music ceased Dacre sighed, and, said he, "That music always agitates one—it moves one's better nature, but it jars also—the spirit of anguish breathes through it—the pathetic and the victorious are soaring there, but all through is felt the vibration of a more than human pain."

Miss Laura Gray laid her hands on her lap and sighed also. A short silence followed, and she in turn spoke.

"Did you ever happen to meet a gentleman named Guy de Beaumirail?"

To this sudden and distinct question he answered as distinctly.

"How very odd! I was at that very moment, by an association hardly definable,

thinking of him. Yes, I do know a good deal of him, and more than I care to know."

"Ardenbroke—you know him?—said it was not improbable," said Miss Gray.

"Oh! did he?"

He looked steadily at her, as if expecting her to say more.

"And Ardenbroke said so?" he resumed. "Well, he was quite right in one sense, although he knows very well how I feel about it."

"He is a very distant relation of ours—of mine, I believe, that is, or a connexion. I am a miserable genealogist; but I am curious to learn something about him, not the least from any interest in him, but for a different reason—something quite different."

"Yes, I saw him once," said Dacre, "very lately, and he's an undeserving fellow. I could not avoid it, but I don't talk about him—that is, as little as I can help."

"But why?" asked Miss Gray.

He smiled and shook his head a little.

"He's an awkward subject," said he.

"Are you ashamed of him?"

"Not exactly ; but—but he's an awkward subject. He might have been very well, a great deal better than I am ; and he chose to throw everything away, and he's in a position which I consider disgraceful, and I—*don't—mention* him."

He uttered this very gravely, and with a slow and deliberate emphasis.

Miss Gray was silent for a little, and then she said, "But I must ask another question—I saw you—I'm certain it was you—speaking to Ardenbroke at the opera on the night on which you were so good as to assist us on the occasion of our breakdown."

Mr. Dacre acquiesced.

"And there was an old man in the same box with gray hair, and with a long face—a severe-looking old man."

Dacre smiled a little, and nodded.

"Now, I have a reason for asking, *is* that old man an enemy of Mr. de Beaumirail's?"

"An enemy?"

"I mean—does he know Mr. de Beaumirail, and does he bear him an enmity?"

"I should say he does bear him ill-will.

I know next to nothing of him, but this—that he is rich, and loves his money as people who have too much only can, and that he has lost a great deal by De Beaumirail's break-up, and I fancy hates him accordingly."

"Yes, and would like to pursue him?"

"I dare say," said Dacre.

"Do you think he would go the length of writing an anonymous letter to determine a vacillating person in a hostile course against Mr. de Beaumirail?"

"It seems odd, but I really know very little about him—nothing, I may say, not even his name, for I forget it—a formal acquaintance of an hour—very slight indeed. He had a part of a box to dispose of and I took it; that is all I know personally of him, and that he is one of De Beaumirail's creditors."

"Do you think he would be a likely person to write an anonymous letter with the purpose I have mentioned?"

"I was told he is a man of business, and I don't think it likely that he would take

that trouble. Was the letter to Arden-broke?"

"No, to another person, a creditor, who could have given De Beaumirail his liberty, by simply signing an agreement for his discharge, and declined to do so, and the anonymous writer urged a persistence in that refusal."

"Oh! that settles it. It could not have been he, for he, being creditor himself, to a large amount, could prevent his discharge until he paid him his uttermost farthing?"

"I see—yes, I suppose so," said Miss Gray, thoughtfully.

"And how did this creditor act under the pressure of his anonymous adviser?" asked Dacre.

"It was no pressure to her. She had already determined on leaving him in prison."

"*She?*—Good heavens! then it was a woman! What beasts those tradespeople are where money is concerned," exclaimed Alfred Dacre.

"Worse—not a tradeswoman, but a lady," said Miss Laura Gray.

"A lady—a lady no longer. She's self-degraded," said Dacre; "don't you think a woman so unsexed and so divested of all good, deserves to be made an example of?"

"Then you are one of those chivalrous lawgivers who would punish women, whom you term the weaker sex, as severely as men?" said Laura Gray.

"*More* severely, in certain cases," he replied. "Where they *are* wicked they are more fiendish than men. Nature has made them softer and purer, most of what is generous in life, all of what is generous in love, belongs to women, and where they commit cold and malignant cruelties they sin against nature, and become very paragons of monsters?"

"And what would you have done to this lady?" inquired Miss Gray. "Burn her alive?"

"No, on second thoughts I should leave her to the chances of reprisal and to the

equities of eternity. May I ask, do you really know anything of this person?"

"I do—yes."

"Is she a Jewess, or is she a Christian?"

"A Christian!" answered Laura Gray, "by profession at least."

"Well, I *know* more of De Beaumirail than I have *seen*. He has injured me probably as much as any other man living. I don't admire Guy de Beaumirail. I divide his character, so far as it is known to me, into three parts—one part I despise, another I hate, and in the third I see rudiments of good. I have no particular wish to say one word in excuse or defence of him, but I don't envy the lady who, being a Christian, as you say, believes her Bible, and reads there the parable of the debtor whom his Lord forgave, and who afterwards took his fellow-servant by the throat, saying 'pay me that thou owest.' "

Mr. Dacre did not speak with enthusiasm. He seemed cool enough about the scamp De Beaumirail, and the menacing words uttered

so coldly, acquired a strong force by reason of a latent contrast.

“There are cases in which reason will not direct us. Our coachman, I remember, one night, put out the carriage lamps—I think it was snowing, he said he could see better without them, by the very faint light in the heavens. That light for me is instinct, and my carriage lamps are reason, and in this puzzle I put it out, and rely upon the faint light from above. I am that wicked Christian you condemn, and I’ll play that music of Beethoven’s again. When I was a very little thing, my poor sister, a good many years older than I, used to play it, and I used to see tears fill her eyes, and flow down her cheeks. It inspires me.”

She began to play again that strange music, without leaving Mr. Dacre time for answer, apology, or explanation.

“I never cry, I hate tears ; but that air half breaks my heart,” she said, “and when I grow irresolute and perplexed, I play it, and light rises up for me in darkness, and courage returns to my heart.”

"I had not an idea, Miss Gray,—I owe you a thousand apologies;" pleaded Mr. Dacre, with great humility.

"Not one, no indeed. It is only that you don't understand this distracting case; you don't know the facts, you don't know my motives. And now I must tell you something, and also ask your assistance."

As she uttered this last sentence she glanced again at good Mrs. Wardell, whom she had already observed nodding in her chair. Billy Winkie, the Dustman, as in the mythology of the nursery, the angel of sleep was termed in my nonage, had visited her, and just at that moment Miss Gray did not choose to observe, or to disturb her nap.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONSULTATION.

"Now, I am going to ask you two or three questions, and you must not think them very odd, until you have heard my reasons," said Miss Laura Gray, looking thoughtfully at a little ring on her finger.

"I shall be only too happy, if I can answer them," said he.

"Has it ever happened to you to receive an anonymous letter?" she asked.

"No, never, unless you so called such things as boys used to send about on St. Valentine's day."

"No, oh no. I mean a letter assuming a grave tone, affecting to criticise conduct, to exhort, and perhaps to menace," said she.

"No, never."

"Then you can hardly understand the way in which such a letter haunts one, the feeling of conjecture, suspicion, and insecurity."

"Pardon me, I can, very well. I once knew a person almost at his wits' ends, from no other cause—an anonymous letter. I think I mentioned that I was fortunate enough to hunt down the writer of it. I assure you it cost a great deal of thought, and some resolution, but I succeeded."

Miss Laura Challys Gray, still looking at her ring, knit her pretty eyebrows slightly in momentary thought.

"I may as well tell you, this letter was written to *me*, and the fact is, though I did not mind it at first, I have grown perfectly miserable about it, and I can't rest till I find out who wrote it."

"In *my* researches I was very lucky. It is once in a hundred times one would have a chance of detecting such a thing; but do you really care?" said he.

"I do, indeed, more than I can describe," she answered.

"I wish so much I could be of the least use. Do you suspect any particular person?"

"No one."

"And why should you care, then?"

"I can't help it, it has made me quite nervous. It is so very strange."

"I wish I had more time at your disposal; but command me, pray, in any way you think may be useful," said he.

"Well, thanks; you are very kind. Ardenbroke, my cousin, you know him, told me that you are acquainted with Mr. de Beaumirail's relations; in fact, that some of them are connected with you, and so I thought you would perhaps be able to form a probable conjecture as to who his enemy might be, for he admits himself in the letter to be a relation."

"He may have a great many whom I have never even heard of," said Dacre; "but my best consideration and exertions are at your service."

"The letter is in the room, would you mind just looking at it?"

And she unlocked her desk and produced the mysterious letter.

"Am I to read it?" said he, as he took it in his fingers.

"Certainly," she replied. "It is an odd letter, and contained that locket, which is a very pretty thing, a toy of some little value," she said, turning the brilliants in the light, so as to make them flash.

"That came from some person who could afford to part with a little money, and the tone of the letter is earnest. I am, however, totally without even a guess. The fact is I know very little about his relations—and what an odd seal—gallant and ghastly; do you read anything of menace in it?"

"Well, no, that did not strike me," and she smiled, but not like a person amused.

"I have now, I think, fixed the whole thing pretty well in my memory; nothing very remarkable about the paper, thick note paper, red wax, posted at Charing Cross—I shall bear everything in my mind."

"It is so kind of you, Mr. Dacre; I'm sure I am a great fool, but I can't help it; I can't get it for a moment out of my mind; even my dreams are troubled with it."

"I don't wonder," said he gravely. "I can quite understand it. I think I should be miserable myself, in such a state of conjecture and uncertainty."

"Your business, I'm afraid, will prevent your recollecting it," pleaded Miss Laura Gray.

"It is much more likely that your commission, Miss Gray, should make me forget my business; I suspect I shall think of very little else."

"It is very kind—you need not mention it before Mrs. Wardell, who has not been attending, unless you happen to discover something about it; that is, if you should call here again."

"I shall certainly call, if you allow me, to-morrow evening. I have already formed a theory; I shall test it very soon; possibly I may have something to tell. If my guess

proves a right one, your intuition warned you well, for that letter indicates a danger, which, if it cost me my life, I will defeat."

Whether Mr. Alfred Dacre spoke these words with more emphasis than he had used before, or that some sense of discomfort had brought it about, at this point in their conversation, Mrs. Wardell wakened with a snort, and said, "Yes, dear, I—I—where's the dog?"

So Mr. Alfred Dacre, with apologies for having stayed too late, took his leave.

Had he ever looked so handsome before? He now filled in relation to her a double office; he was the sole depository of a secret which she felt a strange reluctance to communicate to anyone, and he had devoted himself, as solemnly as words could pledge him, to the task of quieting the anxiety which had fastened upon her.

He was beginning to have her confidence, to be her knight. He was stealing into the rôle of hero to her romance.

When she returned next day from her gardening to the house, she found a letter,

the address of which startled her, for it was written in the same bold, broadnibbed penmanship which had grown so disagreeably familiar with her thoughts. She felt a little chill as turning it about she saw the same seal impressed upon the wax.

Cupid, there, as before, drew his arrow to the head; death held his javelin poised in air; the same simper, the same grin: the same invitation in the motto to "Choose which dart."

She took the letter hastily, and ran up to her room. She did not want talking old Mrs. Wardell to ask any questions.

As, even at that moment, she glanced into the glass, she was struck by the paleness of the pretty face it presented to her.

"Why can't they leave me at peace? I am attacking no one's rights; I ask for no assistance or encouragement from unknown people. Why should I be tortured by these odious letters?"

She sat down, looked over her shoulder, and getting up, secured the door, then

returned and opened the letter with a sick anticipation.

“More incentives to punish Mr. de Beaumirail; more advice, I suppose; more threats.”

She read—

“So, you form a plot to discover me; your path crookens. Beware of the shadow. Mr. Alfred Dacre thinks himself clever. He needs to be so. Dead men who come to life had best be modest. He challenges conflict. He will find me the more potent spirit. The world is open to him. There is beauty in France, in Italy, in Spain; let him open his breast to the dart of Cupid, and not to that other. If you will have him search me out—so be it. If he be wise, he will pass me by with eyes averted. I wait him with my spear poised. Your plot against me has drawn me nearer. Pray that you see me not. De Beaumirail defied me, and I have laid him where he is. I am willing to spare Alfred Dacre; but if need be ——. His blood be on your head.”

A sharp frown marked her face as

she read and re-read this odd composition. She then replaced it in its envelope, looking at it askance as if on an evil talisman. She hid it away in her dressing-case, and locked it up, and then, in an agony, she said—"Why can't they let me be at peace? What can be the meaning of this cruel espionage and dictation? How could any mortal have discovered the subject of our conversation of last night? I am bewildered—frightened. God help me!"

She had murmured words like these aloud, and now looked around lest the spy, who seemed to glide through her rooms like a thief in the night, should have heard them.

"Your plot against me has drawn me nearer," she read again; "the language of the letter is so much more insolent, and angry, and enigmatical, and I, who was so brave, am growing such a coward!"

She bit her lip. She was pale, and felt on the point of bursting into tears.

CHAPTER XVII.

LORD ARDENBROKE'S ADVICE.

"I WISH I had never come here. I wish I were away," were the natural aspirations that rose to her lips, as she went down to the drawing-room, feeling all the time as if she were in a dream.

"You're not ill, I hope, Laura, dear?" said Julia Wardell, who was at her crochet, with her dog beside her. Some minutes had passed, and now she had looked up, and saw how pale and dejected Laura looked.

"No. Oh, no! only a very little headache; nothing at all."

Julia Wardell looked at her inquisitively for a moment, from under her spectacles, but could make nothing of the inspection, and resumed her work with a few words to her

dog, who evidently did not thank her for disturbing him.

A few hours later on the same day Lord Ardenbroke called.

"We like your friend so much," said Mrs. Wardell.

"A friend! Who?"

"Mr. Alfred Dacre," she added.

"Oh! Mr. Alfred Dacre? And do you mean to say he has been here to see you?"

"Yes, he has," answered Mrs. Wardell, with a little triumph. "Is there any reason why he should not?"

"Reason? No, I can't say there is; but it surprises me a little. How soon is he going? I've lost sight of him for so long. Did he say when he goes—when he leaves London?"

"No."

"I wonder where he's staying now; have you any idea?"

"No," again answered Mrs. Wardell.

"I should like to make him out—and—and have a little talk with him; but I must be in Scotland the day after to-morrow, and

by the time I return he will have made his exit."

Lord Ardenbroke was silent for a time, and looked down, and Miss Laura Gray, who glanced covertly at him, saw that there was in his face a look of something more than annoyance—something of suspicion amounting almost to alarm. He stood up, and walked to the window, and looked out.

"Laura, you promised to show me over your grounds, and, from all I see, I fancy you can do so without risk of fatiguing yourself." He laughed. "Will you?"

Laura got her hat, and out they went.

After he had seen the sights, and admired and quizzed, he said, standing with her under the shade of the great old trees—

"And so you have really had a visit from this Mr. Dacre?" he said on a sudden, returning to this subject.

"Yes; is there any reason against it?"

"It is a feeling rather than a reason. I had rather he had not minded coming here."

"You gave us a very good account of him at the opera, you remember. Is there really anything to object to?"

"No; I can't say there is. I never thought—I never blamed him."

"Blamed him! For what?"

"For—anything. I say I liked him, and should have been very glad to see him at Ardenbroke, if he could have come. But there was—there is; in fact, I can't tell you; but I don't think you'd like him."

"You are determined to make him the centre figure of a mystery," said Laura Gray, and laughed.

He smiled, looked down, and became thoughtful.

"Well, you see, it is some years since I saw him, till I met him that night at the opera. There were reports about him saying he was dead; but he turned up there, as you saw. And you used to like a ghost story; just suppose him a ghost, and treat him accordingly."

"What can you mean?" said Miss Gray.

Lord Ardenbroke was laughing, but he looked uncomfortable.

"Place a pentagram at the door, as Dr. Faustus did—a pentagram which Mephistophiles could not pass, you remember."

"I remember; but I should like to know what you mean," said Miss Laura Gray.

"I mean this—simply shut your door against him," he answered.

"Why?" persisted Laura.

"I can't define my reason; but he is a 'double'—a Döppelgänger—he is, I assure you. He is an unreality. I mean what I say. You'll do as you please, of course; but, upon my honour, seriously, I think, you'll be sorry if you don't act as I tell you."

She looked at him with a faint smile of incredulity; but, if he observed it, the challenge was not accepted, and he did not add a word in support of what he had already said.

"I shan't see you now for a good many days. I shall stay for some weeks, at least,

in Scotland ; but my mother will come and see you as soon as she is able to go out for a drive. So, good-bye, Laura, and bid Mrs. Wardell good-bye for me—good-bye. God bless you.”

And he was gone, leaving Miss Gray buried in thought.

“I don’t mind an oracle like Ardenbroke,” she thought. “I’m not to be ordered about like a child, without knowing why I’m to do one thing and avoid another. If Ardenbroke knew what has happened, and saw those letters, and that I could communicate to him the hopes which, rightly or wrongly, I entertain of gaining some information respecting the writer of them from Mr. Dacre’s cleverness and opportunities, he would probably speak quite differently ; and, indeed, I need not care, for the account he gives of Mr. Dacre is quite inconsistent with his advice to exclude him ; and if he chooses to be unintelligible, I’m not to blame if nothing comes of his advice.”

Then she began to wonder at the odd coincidence of Lord Ardenbroke’s advice,

jesting as it was, to regard Dacre as a döppelganger and a ghost, and to exclude him from the house with that kind of horror, and the language of the letter—"dead men who come to life had best be modest." Altogether there was in the tone in which Lord Ardenbroke had spoken of him to-day, a change which chilled her.

Still she never faltered in her resolution to see Mr. Alfred Dacre, to consult him further upon the subject which now engrossed her, and to show him the more truculent letter of to-day.

And now the evening twilight made all things dim, and darkness followed, and that sense of uncertainty which precedes an event however sure to happen, which is intensely looked forward to, began to act upon this excitable young lady's nerves.

This suspense ended, however, as before. At about the same hour the carriage, with lamps burning, drove up to the door. The double-knock resounded, and in a moment or two more Mr. Dacre was announced. Miss Laura Gray was agitated as he

entered, and he, too, looked paler than usual.

Mr. Dacre chatted with an animation and gaiety which, for a time, belied the fatigue and anxiety of his looks. He took tea, and talked in a gay satiric vein of fifty things.

Once or twice Miss Laura Challys Gray detected his stolen gaze fixed upon her with an air of anxious conjecture, and as stealthily averted.

He seemed instinctively aware that Miss Gray did not chose the subject of the letter to be discussed with Mrs. Wardell. At all events, he awaited some allusion to it from the young lady before mentioning the subject, which occupied the foremost place in her mind, and, perhaps, in his.

Mrs. Wardell was one of those convenient old people who, when left to themselves, in the evening, are sure to enjoy a nap—who can sleep in perpendicular positions, and maintain, with a wonderful simulation, the attitudes of waking people, while far away on the wings of slumber.

Laura Gray sat down at the piano.

"Will you play that wonderful *poem*, shall I call it, of Beethoven's, Miss Gray? I had not heard it for ever so many years, when you played it last night."

"No, I think not. I don't care to play it to-night. There are moods in which I can, and others in which I hate it—no, *not* hate, but *fear* it."

"I know. I can understand. Nothing so capricious, or, rather, so sensitive, as those terrible nerves of music. I quite understand the feeling, having, though not so finely, I am sure, experienced the same charm and the same anguish."

"But I'll play something else. Shall it be gay—shall it be melancholy?"

"Not gay, no, not gay," said he, and sat down at the corner of the instrument. "It is so good of you to consent. One seldom hears these things played by a hand that can awaken their inner life."

"I'll play you an odd, melancholy Irish air, with an Irish name, which I can't pronounce—wild, minor, and to my ear so unspeakably plaintive," she said as her fingers

rambled over the notes, making a few preliminary chords and passages.

He listened, leaning on his elbow, his fingers in his soft dark hair. She was looking through the distant window at the old trees, and thinking sadly, and, as he marked the plaintive melancholy of her beautiful features, and fancied he saw a brimming of tears in her large, blue eyes, gazing steadily at her from the shade of his hand, a smile, cold and crafty, glimmered on his face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TRUE KNIGHT.

THE air was played out and over. He sighed and thanked Miss Laura Gray.

They both knew that Mrs. Wardell was lost, for the moment, in one of her little evening naps. A restraint was removed, and Miss Gray, now and then touching a note or a chord on the keys to which her eyes were lowered, approached, at last, the subject which troubled her mind.

“You were so good as to say, Mr. Dacre, that you would try to make out something about that letter?”

“You may be quite sure, Miss Gray, that I have not forgotten or neglected—I have been at work about it since I saw you, but I am sorry to say with an unsatisfactory result. The person whom I suspected is certainly *not* the writer of the letter.”

"Oh!" murmured Miss Gray, in a tone of great disappointment. And a short silence followed.

"I don't despair, however. If I were only sure that you really made a point of discovering, there's *nothing* I would not do to accomplish it."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Dacre. I don't know anything I am so interested in—in fact so anxious about. I've had another to-day, will you read it?"

"Only too much obliged," said he, as he took the letter from her hand. "Yes! The same seal. 'Choose which dart.' Very obliging of him. Cupid—an odd ally of such a writer. He offers you there—I'm interpreting the emblems and inscription—amity, if not something more tender still—on the one hand, or death on the other. Cajolery and terror would be a suitable motto for such a seal, writer, and despatch: and now for the contents."

So Mr. Dacre read, and carefully re-read the letter.

"I can't tell you, Miss Gray," he said, for

the first time with an expression of real sympathy and concern in his handsome face—
“With how much sympathy and compassion for you—with how much indignation against the cowardly wretch who tries to alarm you—and, I fear, has succeeded in causing you a great deal of anxiety—I say, I can’t express the feelings with which I have read this dastardly thing. I wish, Miss Gray, I could, or rather dare. But this I may venture to say, that I accept this miscreant’s challenge, that I will even prolong my stay in England, at all risks, and leave nothing untried to unearth and punish him.”

“Oh, no, pray no—I’m so much obliged; but I merely wish him discovered, and an end put effectually to these annoyances,” said Miss Gray.

He smiled—he was still holding the letter by one corner, and he shook his head slowly as he answered—

“You must allow me a discretion in dealing with the writer of this, should I be fortunate enough to discover him. Only, this you may be sure of, that your name shall

not be publicly mixed in the matter, unless with your distinct permission."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks," said she; "but, Mr. Dacre, there must be no violence. If I thought there was danger of that kind it would greatly increase my anxiety; and, in fact, I should prefer going away, and leaving my persecutor in possession of the field."

He shook his head, and laughed a little again, still looking at the letter.

"I don't think going away would save you from that annoyance," he said.

"Really? Mr. Dacre, do you think he would follow us? I have not mentioned a word of this to Mrs. Wardell. I know she would be frightened. But do you really think so? or what exactly do you suppose?"

"Judging by this letter, I should say that the person who wrote it—whether man or woman—has an ulterior object, distinct from any revenge upon that miserable person De Beaumirail, who is, perhaps, as well where he is as anywhere else. I can't, of course, guess, in the least, what that ob-

ject may be ; but I am sure very few people would take so much trouble in following up a grudge owed to so insignificant a person as De Beaumirail now is. Of course there can be no good-will, but there must be a more powerful motive—this is an organized affair, that last letter shows, and is *intended* to show that they have secured the services of, at least, one spy in your house.”

Laura changed colour as he said this, fixing his dark eyes inquiringly upon her.

“I hope not. I can’t think of any one who would be so base.”

“It is a painful discovery, but the world is full of base people ; and the worst of it is that the baser they are—within the limits of caution—the better they get on,” said Alfred Dacre, in that sarcastic tone which he sometimes used. “Is there any person in the house who may be the writer of those letters—*think*.”

“No one—no, not a creature. No servant could write a letter so correctly ; it is certainly no one in the house,” she answered eagerly.

“Well, then, they are written by some one, as I said, who commands the services of, at least, one spy in your house. It may take time to detect that agent ; but accident, vigilance, a momentary indiscretion, may lead to detection. If we had that end of the thread in our fingers, it would, perhaps, answer as well. I think I should reach the other. But, for the present, we must be secret—not a creature in your house must suspect that these letters affect your conduct, or even your spirits—and as Mrs. Wardell does not know anything of them —”

Here good Mrs. Wardell snorted, covering this evidence of her condition by a little cough. Miss Gray struck gently a few chords, and the old lady resumed her nap.

“You were saying——”

“I may say that Mrs. Wardell had better, for the present, continue in total ignorance of their existence.”

“Perhaps so.”

“*Certainly* ; because Mrs. Wardell would talk to her maid, and she in the house-

keeper's room ; and the person who acts as spy would report that the letters had produced an agitation, and *that* would induce caution on the part of the machinators, and increase the difficulty of our pursuit."

Miss Gray thoughtfully assented.

"And now I'll tell you why I think things apparently so slight as these letters deserve your prompt and serious attention. I am quite clear that your intuition has not deceived you. There is an object in these practices deeper than any hatred of De Beaumirail. They want to frighten you into some concession not yet so much as hinted at. The fact that a trinket of value has been sent with the letters, convinces me that something serious is intended. For it was no gentleman who wrote that villanous letter. That locket can't be worth much less than a hundred guineas. It is sunk, you may be quite certain, upon a commercial calculation of ultimate profits. Your leaving the country would not extricate you from their machinations. The same annoyances will probably follow you, go where

you may. It is a terrorism, with an object, and there is but one way of relieving you from it, and, that is, by tracking the beast to his lair; and, with God's help, I'll reach him."

"But, Mr. Dacre, there is no need to run into danger," began Miss Gray.

"Danger disappears before a resolute will. There shall be no danger—nothing but victory. Let me tell you why I speak in so sanguine and confident a spirit: if, as I suspect, this odious persecution originates from some one point in the circle of debt and villany that surrounds that miserable fellow, De Beaumirail, I have opportunities which no other person possesses, of placing my hand upon its spring. I will see De Beaumirail again to-morrow. I don't much enjoy an interview with him." He laughed. "I have had one already, and thought it quite enough; but I must see him, and from him I will learn who are his enemies among the people at present in London. I shall have all the light that he can indirectly throw upon it; and there is a great deal

that I cannot yet tell you. But I hope I may soon have something very decisive and very satisfactory to say."

"I wish, Mr. Dacre, I could tell you how much obliged——"

"No—no—you are not to use that phrase to me."

"But I can't help saying how very kind I think it; and I think it is very selfish, allowing a friend to engage in so irksome and, perhaps, dangerous an enterprise."

"You don't know all I feel about it. You have called me your friend, pray do not recal that distinction—it is my dearest hope to deserve it. You shall soon see how terribly in earnest I can be, and with how enthusiastic a devotion I consecrate myself to such a cause as yours. I abandon every other occupation and pursuit, and, till I have succeeded, shall think of nothing else. And—no—you are *not* to thank me. Perhaps when I have succeeded I may hear, without a sense of utter unworthiness, that delightful assurance."

Mrs. Wardell had been conversing with

her dog while Mr. Dacre finished his sentence; and under cover of this tender babble and its snarling accompaniment he added—

“Have I permission to call again to-morrow evening? I may have nothing to tell you; but possibly I may hear news that will interest you.”

“Pray do; but—but you will be engaged about business of your own—that business that so much occupies your time.”

“I have told you, Miss Gray, I forswear it in favour of yours; not one moment of my time shall it engage to-morrow.”

“Then you *can* come to us earlier, can’t you?”

Mr. Dacre’s countenance darkened, and then he smiled, oddly:—

“I thought I mentioned to you, Miss Gray—or—no, I beg pardon, it was to Ardenbroke, that it was not my business only, but a condition imposed upon me altogether in the interest of other people, not to let myself be known to be in London—at least for some little time. I am, therefore, obliged to observe a sort of mystery, or to

make my excursions—as that UNKNOWN CORRESPONDENT says—like a man who has returned from the dead — is not that his phrase?—in the dark.”

“ In the dark ?”

“ Yes—certainly in the dark.”

His even white teeth glimmered as he laughed gently and coldly, and she fancied he looked paler.

Did he anticipate more danger than he chose to avow ?

“ Those who invoke the dead must abide the consequences. I look upon their mention of me, and in those menacing terms, as of good augury. If they understood me better they would not have resorted to threats. As it is, their doing so betrays their apprehensions—they are conscious of my opportunities.”

Mr. Dacre was looking sternly on the ground beside his boot as he spoke, and he fell into a grim reverie of a few seconds.

“ Suppose,” he said suddenly, raising his eyes with a look inquisitive, and it seemed also cruel—“ A thought has struck me.

Suppose the motive of this experiment upon your nerves should prove to be hatred of *you* rather than of De Beaumirail?"

"Hatred of *me*?"

"Yes, Miss Gray; because you are yourself incapable of hatred, malice, and revenge, you fancy such things do not exist, or if you do, you do not, and cannot, understand their infernal psychology."

Miss Gray dropped her eyes.

"Nothing so hard for the young and gentle who have seen nothing of the world—nothing of human nature—except within the paradise of home, as to believe in the existence of those reptile natures, cold-blooded, full of poison, patient, and more subtle than any beast of the field."

"The confines of revenge and justice are so hard to define," said Miss Gray in a very low tone, still looking down.

"Oh! oh!" he laughed very softly in a kind of derision, "much they think of justice. No; the strange thing is this—such people will hate you *without* a cause—will hate you for your prosperity—for your

position ; or, if in your walk through life, ever so accidentally, you tread on a fibre or touch their skins, they'll sting you to death if they can."

Miss Gray sighed.

"You, Miss Gray, are young ; you have as yet neither had adulation nor misery to harden your heart. You are forgiving and compassionate, and can conceive no other nature. Because you are conscious of never having intentionally inflicted one moment's pain on any living creature—are incapable of revenge——"

"No, *not* incapable of revenge ; but my revenges are peculiar, and not from a malignant motive," said she, interrupting suddenly.

"Revenge, and Miss Laura Challays Gray ! Oh ! no. That were a discord of which nature is incapable. Revenge ! Perhaps you avenged a scratch by striking your kitten with a glove, or committing some other such cruelty !"

"No," she again interrupted ; "I have been what many good and stupid people

would call revengeful, but not from malice. I have requited injury by punishment, and I mean to persevere in so doing."

Mr. Dacre smiled and shook his head.

"I suspect, Miss Gray, you are taking a tragic view of yourself. There are some things too hard for my belief, and one is, the possibility of your cherishing a harsh thought or feeling."

"But I can't bear to be thought better than I am," said Miss Gray; "and it may be that it will help you to conclusions."

"Yes," he said, with a faint laugh, "so it might, if you think you really have enemies."

"I don't know. You saw Mr. de Beaumirail?"

"I saw him, yes, for ten minutes only; it was a very dry and hurried interview. My wish was to make it as short as possible, and I had to crowd a great deal into it."

"Did he mention me or my family?"

"No, not a word."

He paused inquiringly.

"Well, then," she said, "there's no need that I should mention him more."

There was a little silence here.

"From what you have told me this evening, Miss Gray, I may conjecture a great deal, and for the present I must return to my proper element—darkness."

"Oh?" she said, with that look of imperfect apprehension and inquiry, which seemed to ask for explanation.

But Mrs. Wardell now broke in with—

"Charming music! Do you sing, Mr. Dacre?"

"I can't say I do. I once did, a little; but among musicians I could not venture; and, at all events, my happy minutes have run out, and I must say good night."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHO ARE THE DACRES?

Now he was gone, and with the moment of departure came that revulsion which always followed her interviews with him.

How was it that he had stolen into those strangely confidential terms with her? So soon as he went she felt like a somnambulist awakened, who opens her eyes in the confusion of an interrupted dream, and in an unintelligible situation. Something for a moment like the panic of such an awaking, agitated Miss Gray.

Next day, at about five o'clock, came the old Countess of Ardenbroke. The invalid either could not or would not get out of her carriage, so Laura Gray came down and got into it, and was very affably received by the thin old lady in an ermine tippet, propped

with cushions, and with her feet upon a heated stool. It was hard to say which was paying this visit. She made Laura sit opposite to her, and told her all about her health and her sufferings, and her wants and sorrows with her maid, and various little bits of news about fifty people of whom Laura had never heard before. And now the visit being over, before Laura bid her good-bye, she said—

“You know something, Lady Ardenbroke, of the De Beaumirails, who were related to us?”

“Yes; not a great deal, but something.”

“Can you tell me anything about relations or connexions of theirs named Dacre?”

“Yes, there were Dacres.”

“Are they related to *us*?”

“No. De Beaumirail’s uncle married a Dacre, that’s all. Why?”

“Nothing, only that; I know that a Mr. Dacre has turned up in London who claims to be a relative of the De Beaumirails.”

“Don’t believe it, my dear. The last

of those Dacres was Alfred Dacre, who died, let me see, fully ten years ago."

"Alfred! Are you sure?"

"Yes. Alfred."

"Oh, then, it must be a brother of his."

"No, it can't be that. There was no brother. The property has gone to the Davenants," said the old lady.

"Alfred Dacre, a friend of Ardenbroke's," repeated Miss Gray; "then you have seen him, I dare say?"

"Oh, dear, yes, a hundred times."

"Then it must be a mistake. Was he agreeable?"

"Yes; agreeable, amusing, and odd. I think he was clever."

"And young?"

"Yes, young—quite a young man."

"And good-looking?"

"Oh, very good-looking. The Dacres were all that. I'll tell you what will give you an idea. If you suppose Mario, the Tenore at the Opera, in some of his most becoming parts, you have a very good idea of him."

"Oh!" said Laura Gray in a very low tone, dropping her eyes for a moment. She had seen the great Tenore, and the general likeness had struck her on seeing her mysterious visitor.

"Yes, it must be a mistake, she repeated."

"I think so," said the old lady. "There is not one of that family left, and it is ten years since that handsome creature died. There may be cousins. I don't say positively; but if there are I never heard. And why do you ask me all these questions?"

"I haven't asked many, have I? But it was only that when we heard him mentioned, Julia Wardell remembered the name, and was puzzling over it."

"Well, if there is one of that handsome family left, pray don't think of making him master of Gray Forest. Dear me, how the little creature blushes!"

She had blushed very brilliantly.

"I—I didn't know; but if I have," said Laura, "it is because I blush more capriciously than any other person I ever heard of, and totally without a cause."

And hereupon she blushed still more intensely.

“Well, dear, don’t mind ; it’s very becoming.”

And she kissed her. And Miss Gray said, with a laugh—

“It is very provoking ; but I assure you my blushes bear false witness, and there is not the slightest excuse for them. And now your horses are impatient, and I have delayed you a great deal too long.”

So in turn she kissed the old lady, who forthwith departed for her drive in the park.

“It must be a cousin, then,” thought the young lady as old Lady Ardenbroke’s carriage drove away, “and when we come to know him a little better, of course he will tell us everything.”

That evening the two ladies sat as usual in the drawing-room of Guildford Hall, and the hour of tea was approaching when Charles Mannering joined the little party.

Laura Challys Gray was very frank and true ; but was she quite so glad to see him

as she seemed? Perhaps she was; but if so, she quickly recollected something that qualified that sentiment.

Mr. Dacre would probably look in as usual, and would he quite like an introduction to a stranger under his present circumstances?

I don't know whether he imagined some little constraint or coldness in his reception, for he said—

“I'm afraid it's very cool my coming this way. I should have waited, I dare say, until I was sent for?”

Though he laughed; Miss Gray thought he was piqued.

“If you stay away, Charlie, until I send for you, it will be a long wait. Not,” she added kindly, “that I should not wish to see you back, but being just as proud as you are—if you choose to stand aloof and grow ceremonious—I shall draw back a step too, and then, little by little, we shall stand so far that the tips of our fingers can't touch, and shaking hands any more will be quite out of the question. Therefore, Charlie

Mannering, you must never be high or cold with me ; but if you are angry scold me, and if you think I have affronted you, say so, and we may quarrel for ten minutes very spiritedly, but at the end of that time we'll be sure to shake hands, and then we'll be better friends than ever."

He smiled on her, very much pleased. He looked on her as if he would have given her the Kohinoor at that moment, had he possessed it. But he only said, after a little silence—

"I don't know, Challys, that you are not preaching a very good philosophy—what shall we call it ? the sect of the plain-speakers—of which it would hereafter be written : This school of philosophers was founded by Laura Challys Gray, the first of the wise women of Brompton, who practised her philosophy with such a charm and success, that she speedily drew about her a school of disciples of the other sex. But it needed so much beauty as well as so much natural goodness to make the things they said go down with the unlearned, that her followers

were ultimately beaten and dispersed ; and the doctrine and practice of the plain-speakers being discovered, in a short time, to amount simply to speaking the truth, fell speedily into contempt, and in deference to the devil, whom it was intended to shame, and who is always paramount in London and the suburbs, it was peremptorily put down by the respectable inhabitants, and so fell into absolute neglect."

"Many thanks for that page of history, which will also recount," said Miss Gray, "that, in the same remarkable age, one Charles Mannering, of the same city, set up as a prophet, in which profession he had some moderate success, up to the period of fulfilment, when nothing ever came of his prophecies ; and when he and the wise woman of Brompton met of an evening, they had so much to say to one another, and were so very wise, that they invariably forgot that it was time to take their tea, the more especially as in that dull age their audience usually fell asleep, and there was no one consequently to remind them. So, as Julia

Wardell is taking her nap, would you mind touching the bell? for I think a little tea would do us all good."

They had tea, and talked on pleasantly, and Mrs. Wardell, waking, said—

"By-the-bye, Charles Mannering, you know Mr. Dacre, don't you?"

"Haven't that pleasure. Who is he?"

"Oh, dear! a most agreeable and handsome young man, whose acquaintance we have made. He'll probably be here to tea. Did not Laura mention him?"

"No, I think not."

"Did you?" said Mrs. Wardell.

"No," said Charles, "but I'm really glad to hear you have made an agreeable acquaintance. I told you you would find your solitude here insupportable, Didn't I?"

He spoke with a smile; but I don't think that he was a bit pleased, nevertheless, to find that solitude invaded. I suspect he would have liked very much to ask some questions about this charming Mr. Dacre, of whom he had already an uncomfortable perception, as an insupportable puppy whom

these ladies were, no doubt, bent upon making him still more conceited. But what need he care, or how could it possibly interest him? So, with the hand next it, he gently touched a few notes of the piano, and hummed an air.

While he was thus engaged, the door opened, and Mr. Dacre was announced.

CHAPTER XX.

THEY DRINK TEA.

MR. DACRE entered, and, as he did so, his quick eye detected the presence of the stranger, leaning upon the piano. Miss Gray observed the shrewd, hard glance which he directed on him—it was hardly momentary, it seemed but to touch its object, but it was stern and suspicious.

“I ventured, you see, to look in on my way into town,” said he, advancing quite like himself in a moment.

“We are charmed to see you,” said Mrs. Wardell.

“Rather cool at this hour, and not quite, usual,” thought Charles Mannering sarcastically, as he looked at Miss Gray, whose hand the stranger’s was just now touching.

“By Jove! a fellow learns as he gets on

—nothing like impudence, I do believe, plenty of conceit, and a little impertinence. I dare say I'm rather in the way here."

Charles Mannering's sneer, however, was not inconsistent, it seemed, with his staying where he was. He had no notion of going—he went on fiddling at the piano, and a stranger might have fancied that his whole soul was absorbed in the attempt to stumble through the treble of an air.

Mr. Dacre put down his cup of tea on the table, and seating himself beside Miss Gray, he said, with a glance toward the pianist, which seemed to say, "There's no risk, I see, of being overheard."

"I have made a discovery since I saw you."

He paused with an odd smile, looking in her eyes. She was silent.

"Can't you guess what it is?"

"About those letters," she said, very low.

"Of course—yes—about those letters; can't you guess?"

She looked at him, and down for a moment, but she could not, nor at all fancy

why he looked at her with a kind of significance.

"No, I can't—not the least," she said, at last, with a little shake of her head.

She fancied he looked a little disappointed.

"Ah! then you really have formed no conjecture?"

"No—none. Do pray tell me if there is anything worse than I fancied," she said.

"No. In one sense not at all—that is, my suspicions point at no one in whom you place confidence, or with whom you need have any relations, but recollect they are as yet suspicions only, and I thought that you, perhaps, might throw some light to confirm or dispel them."

She shook her head.

"Well, I shan't say a word more, until I can speak with a little more confidence. If my conjecture is right, a plan both curious and atrocious has been formed. I give myself three days to find it out. I shall withdraw myself, for that time, from every other occupation. The villain De Beaumirail is, I believe, implicated in it, and its centre

is another person of whom you know nothing."

"Mr. de Beaumirail! How can that possibly be? The letters come evidently from an enemy of his."

"Say a *pretended* enemy—a real enemy of *yours*. I do not say the letters are written by him: they are written by a still worse and more dangerous man, and they are, as I thought, but the prelude to other steps. You had an idea, do you remember, that you were watched—I certainly am, and with no friendly purpose. Don't, pray, Miss Gray, don't suppose that I regret any little trouble that may fall to my share in this affair. You little know my feelings; you little understand, if there were a real danger to be encountered, with what devotion, and happiness, and pride, I would meet it." This was spoken low and rapidly, while his great dark eyes were fixed on her with the enthusiasm and admiration, which for a moment held her in their wild fascination, and before she could chill it by look or word that gaze was lowered, and turning quickly, he said to

Mrs. Wardell, who bored him so wonderfully little, by either talking or listening, during these strange little visits. "Have you heard, Mrs. Wardell, of the wonderful man who is coming to London—a Malayan magician, who has turned the heads of all Paris, and sees futurity—and describes it—in a crystal circle which he holds in the hollow of his hand?"

"Futurity! Tell us our fortunes, I suppose! Why that will be extremely amusing, and even curious, I dare say."

"Quite amazing, if all they say, or even half they swear, is to be believed. Everything turns out exactly as he says, and he can tell everyone everything that ever happened to them in their lives."

"A rather inconvenient faculty," said Charles Mannering, who had seen the little confidential *tête-à-tête* which had just occurred, and had observed, he fancied, a tinge in Laura Gray's cheek which was not there before, and had felt the sting of a new mortification. "Of course, with people who have no fault to find with themselves it is

different, but I should not like to find a Malayan savage in possession of all my poor secrets, and ready to hand them over for half-a-crown to my civilized neighbours."

This was to Mrs. Wardell.

"Well, of course, there are things one would tell to friends, you know," began Mrs. Wardell.

"I don't know," answered Dacre, "that friends are not the very last people one ought to tell anything to; they are so reserved and odd in this age of iron, or brass, or whatever it is; and my belief is that people who don't trust, are not to be trusted."

Laura Gray laughed, and said—

"You are very hard upon friends to-night; I hope, Mr. Dacre, *you* don't think all that."

Mr. Dacre smiled, without glancing even momentarily at Charles Mannering, or seeming at all conscious of his presence. Perhaps he viewed that young gentleman's presence here as much in the light of an impertinence, as Charles had his.

"I don't exactly know what the question is."

"I mean," she said, "that people are worse friends—more reserved, and less trustworthy, than they used to be ; in fact, that friendship is degenerating."

"I believe that the cant of perpetual degeneracy, which has been fashionable in all ages, is simply the register of the discontent that characterizes our unreasonable human nature in every age alike. Every man who is treated according to his deserts fancies himself ill-used because he is not treated according to his egotism. When I hear general invectives I know that the declaimer is wincing under some secret ulceration of vanity ! Friendship degenerating ! Human nature losing its characteristics ! The Ethiopian changing his skin, and the leopard his spots ! How could you think me such a muff ?"

"But that is very much—is not it ?—what Mr. Mannering said," interposed plain-spoken Mrs. Wardell. "What was it—

what *did* you say?" she asked that young gentleman.

"I talked, I believe, some such folly as young men usually do when they attempt to philosophize. I no more think of remembering it when I do it, than I dream of listening when others commit the same folly."

Mr. Dacre looked at Miss Gray and laughed gently. It was ineffably provoking, it seemed to say, "How amusingly the fellow winces. Were they making a butt of him?"

It did not mend the matter that he was nearly certain that this Mr. Dacre, who had grown in a day or two into an intimacy, was the same handsome young man whom he had seen in his box at the opera.

"I know I'm not so pretty as that doll of a fellow, but I'm worth fifty of him," was Charles Mannering's modest thought; "I'm a man; he's a puppy. He talks like a coxcomb. He's a selfish, conceited, pushing fool, and I could throw him out of that window as easily as the sofa-pillow."

Charles was very much vexed, but he had no notion of carrying on this covert sparring with him, a game in which he might possibly suffer; in which, at all events, it was not easy to keep one's temper.

"Suppose we have a little more light?" suggested Mrs. Wardell. The room was very imperfectly lighted; it was a fancy of Laura's when there was moonlight.

"Isn't it almost a pity?" said Laura, approaching the window, and looking out. "It seems so inhospitable—shutting out the moon, so gentle and beautiful and benignant. I think I'll put it to the vote; what do you say, Charles?"

"Very much honoured; but I can't agree with you. I have no sympathy with your hospitality, in this case, and I think the world's large enough for the moon; it has room enough to shine in without troubling your drawing-room; and I'm not so sure of its benignity, and I have no sympathy with the man in it; and altogether I'm for shutting the whole affair out, and having the

drawing-room to ourselves, and the blessing of candle-light."

Miss Gray nodded, a little vexed, perhaps; very childish, but so it was; and Charles's speech was not the pleasanter for this.

"And what do you say, Mr. Dacre?" she inquired.

"I? Of course I vote for the moon and against the candles. I quite agree in the spirit of your remarks; and now, Miss Gray, we stand divided, two and two, and, as the lawyers say, there is no rule, and things remain as they are."

"Really! Well, that's very nice, and I think that lamp is quite light enough to read and work by; and, Julia dear, I'll only ask a few minutes longer; the light is really so beautiful."

And she leaned on the side of the window looking out. Under the dark elm trees, near the gate, she saw the carriage faintly; over their tops, above a filmy cloud, the moon shone resplendent.

Charles Mannering saw her, and would have liked to go to her side, and look out

also. But he was vexed and high with her, and would not go till he was very clearly wanted.

But Alfred Dacre was, in a moment, at her side.

“I must go in two or three minutes,” said he. “I have a call to make to-night; you think, perhaps, I am making too much of this affair; you will think otherwise by-and-bye; but you have nothing to fear, being, as you are, forewarned.” He spoke dejectedly, although his words were cheering. “Remember, though evil spirits compass us about, they cannot hurt us but by our own fault. I say this to prevent your allowing yourself to be agitated if a new scene in this conspiracy should suddenly unfold itself. I do believe this place is watched. I know that I am suspected, and I regret this only because it makes my success the more uncertain. I have said all this to assure you that no matter what unlooked-for occurrence may take place, you have no personal danger to apprehend.”

“I don’t understand you. I grow only

more and more bewildered," said Miss Gray.

"I don't wish you to understand more than that. Simply that you are not to let your fears overpower you. The real struggle will be at a distance. Actual danger shall not touch you, and now—(I was going to say good-night, but, oh! not yet!) I shan't see you, Miss Gray, for three days, and then something decisive. Three days seem a long time now—what an egotist I am, and you hate egotism. Absorbed by my one dominant feeling, I would subordinate all people and considerations to my special revenge—and you hate vengeance—upon the troublers of this tranquil little place. Pray mention it no more to-night; my minutes here are counted. Is it possible to describe that moonlight? How it spiritualizes all vulgar things. I am sure that is the secret of its charm for lovers and for poets; it so resembles—I mean in that respect—both love and poetry. How love, for instance, exalts and beautifies the homeliest objects in the surroundings of the beloved. Do you remember, Miss Gray, you

mentioned a moonlight sketch of the ruins of Gray Forest, and promised to let me see it when next I came?"

"So I did," she said, a little flattered by his recollection. "But it really is not worth looking at."

"I've heard of your drawing, Miss Gray. Ardenbroke, who is a very good judge, admires it so immensely, and I've been told it is not the least like the drawing of an amateur—so much poetry, so much force."

"If you really thought all that, I should be very foolish to lose your good opinion by showing what my poor drawings really are."

"Is the one I speak of in the room?"

"No."

"Could you send and get it?"

"Well, no; but I never make a fuss about anything I've made up my mind to; and you shall see the sketch, as you make a point of it, although it is perfectly true that I am ashamed of it."

"Pray not *now*, though," said he; "I had no idea you could think of going yourself."

But it would not do; she was gone.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE FACE.

OLD-FASHIONED lamps, swinging from chains, lighted the lobby, and the stairs, and the hall. She knew the spot in the library where she could lay her hand upon the drawing. For a moment she had forgotten the anxious subject of her thoughts. But the transition from the glow of the lighted hall, to the spacious and dark room, with its narrow scenery standing in moonlight and shadows, white and black, before the window, with a sudden chill recalled the hated ambiguities of the conspiracy, which day and night fevered her curiosity, and alarmed her imagination.

With an instinctive wish to escape from the room and accomplish her errand as quickly as might be, she hastened to the

table near the window, and as if her approach had evoked it, suddenly the figure of a small, rather long-limbed man, appeared at the same large window, and laying his arm above his eyes, to shade them from the reflected light, he looked for some seconds into the room.

The light coming from behind touched his face oddly. The outlines of the figure were apish, and there was, as well as she could see, something sinister, which stared into the room with great eyeballs and a gaping mouth.

She stood quite motionless, and chill, as if she saw a ghost. She could not tell whether this man, with his face close to the glass, and his features distorted by the faint odd light and deep shadow, saw her or not. One thing she felt—that he might be one of those persecuting agents who were spying out all her ways, and weaving about her a net, with what object or how much malignity she could not guess. For a moment she fancied that this person, who seemed, by an intuition, aware that she was coming, had

placed himself there with the intention of injuring her.

As quickly almost as he came, however, he disappeared. Very pale, Laura Gray found herself on the stairs, close to the drawing-room door. Charles Mannering she heard singing to his own accompaniment for the entertainment of Mrs. Wardell, who seldom failed to ask him. The sounds reassured the girl, though she still felt frightened, and she was about to venture into the room under cover of the music, when, looking stealthily over the banister, she saw the hall-door partly open, and the little sinister figure she had seen at the window, step in, peering jealously round him as he did.

The idea that he was in search of her took possession of Miss Gray. With renewed terror she got into the drawing-room.

Charles was singing, and Mrs. Wardell whispering to her lapdog, as she tenderly folded him in her arms, the question, "Is not that charming, you little angel? but we mustn't bark—no, no."

Charles Mannering's performance was nothing to boast of, and he knew it. He chose to oblige the old lady to-night, however ; partly, I think, to show that he was perfectly at his ease, and happy ; and being engrossed with his own music, as singers are, Miss Gray passed across the room lightly, without exciting observation, except that of Mr. Dacre. Her face was so pale, that he exclaimed in a whisper, and with a gaze of alarm,

“ Has anything happened ? ”

In a whisper she replied,

“ A very wicked-looking, little man, with a pale face—I could hardly see it, stared in through the library window at me, and, as I reached the top of the stairs, he came in at the hall-door. I think he must be one of those dreadful people ; for God's sake, Mr. Dacre, will you run down and try and get the servants to help ? ”

Mr. Dacre got quietly out of the room, and ran down the stairs. There was no sign of anyone in the hall, or in the rooms opening from it. The servants had seen no one.

"A mistake, no doubt!" said Mr. Dacre, and ran up the stairs again, and, as he did so, he thought,

"De Beaumirail and a Jew, a not unnatural association!" and he laughed gently, and shrugged, as he said it.

Softly, lightly, he entered the room.

"But that you are so confident," he whispered, "I should fancy it must be a dream—not a creature except the servants downstairs, and everything perfectly quiet. They have gone to search the upper part of the house, but I think you may be quite at ease about it."

"No dream—quite a certainty," she said.

"Oh! no—not that; I mean only that the fellow just peeped in at the window, and afterwards at the door. I wish to heaven I had seen him, so that I should have known him afterwards, if I met him. I quite agree with you as to the object of his visit."

As they talked a postman's knock sounded through the hall, and Miss Gray was in-

stantly silent; she expected one of those odious letters.

Fortunately, for the safety of the secret, which she still hated to divulge, Mrs. Wardell had asked Charles Mannering for another song—a quiet little pastoral ditty, which she loved, and which he sang with very angry feelings, for he did not lose the little scene—the low-toned confidences—in short, the insufferable rudeness of Miss Laura Gray and that conceited young man, who did not know how to behave himself, and talked incessantly all the time he was singing.

No letter came up—no parcel—nothing; five minutes more passed, and Mr. Alfred Dacre lingeringly took his leave; and he whispered, as he was about to go, “May I write a line if anything should happen?”

“Well, I suppose so; that is, if anything of any consequence should happen—thanks.”

So he bid her good-bye. He took Mrs. Wardell’s hand, and bid her also a farewell—and took no notice of Charles Man-

nering, who took none of him ; and then this little drum broke up, leaving Charles very sulky and bitter, and Laura distrait and excited.

I can't wonder at Charles Mannering's mistake, all things considered ; and, perhaps, his odd state of temper is also intelligible.

" I see, I *was* very much in the way this evening," said Charles, not able to contain longer.

" You ! in the way ; not in the least ; no one is ever in my way ; if they are disposed to be so, I dismiss them."

" Then, they must be greater fools than I if they ever come back."

" But you were not *de trop*, and I did not send you away ; on the contrary, you made yourself very much the reverse. I wanted to say a few words to Mr. Dacre, and I thought you very considerate, if you meant it."

" I really did not happen to be thinking about it at the time ; and what you have just said quite satisfies me, and I need not reproach myself any more."

He was thinking of going; but he wanted resolution. He took up a book, and turned over its leaves, and tried to think of something careless to say to Mrs. Wardell, but could not; and, at all events, that lady was at that moment in one of her gentle naps. He looked toward the window where Laura Gray was sitting, but she was not looking toward him, on the contrary, through the window, "following, no doubt," thought Charles, "in spirit, the departed Don Whiskerandos, who has passed beneath those files of elms."

This sensitive Charles Mannering—sensitive at least in all that concerned her—saw that there was no suspicion of affectation or pique, but that her inattention was perfectly genuine.

"Polite, certainly," said he, with a bitter smile, glancing from nodding Mrs. Wardell to Laura Gray, who was looking out of the window.

He was thinking of going unperceived out of the room, and adding some life to the landscape which Miss Gray was contem-

plating, by walking away before her eyes. But again his heart failed him, and he sat down on the corner of a chair beside the unfailing piano, and began again to touch its notes.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHARLES OBJECTS TO THE NEW WORSHIP.

At length he could stand it no longer, and, said he, sitting erect and addressing the window in a clear tone, and with a rather bitter jocularitv—

“Nothing ever arrests the progress of mind and the march of discovery.”

Laura looked at him with her large eyes, a little puzzled, and after a little pause, she said—

“Your allusions, I am sure, are wise, if one could only understand them.”

“I did not intend to be the least mysterious, I assure you. I’ve been away just forty-eight hours. It is very amusing—and I find a new worship established.”

“A new worship! I don’t know what you mean. What worship, pray, have you

found here? Worship is a very comprehensive term—isn't it?" said the young lady, with a colour suddenly heightened, and looking at him with brilliant eyes.

Perhaps, if she had not blushed so ambiguously, he might have kept his temper better; but the feeling that, in the very act of snubbing him, she was exhibiting this beautiful evidence of so different a feeling with respect to that miserable coxcomb! Unaided human nature could hardly be expected to stand that.

"Worship—yes, quite true—a very comprehensive term. There are all sorts of worship. The Egyptians worshipped reptiles, and some people worship monkeys, I believe; and others, perhaps more degraded still, worship themselves."

"Still enigmatical; but I think there can be no doubt that you intend to be—I'll only say—*disagreeable*; and suppose there is a worship established here. I think I may do and say pretty much, here, what I like, without being considered intrusive. And, suppose Julia Wardell—oh! I see, she's

asleep—has committed the impiety of removing Mr. Charles Mannering from her altar, and the profanity of setting up Mr. Alfred Dacre instead, is not this a land of liberty? Hasn't she a right to practice her idolatries according to her taste? I don't see why the good old soul should not have her plurality of Josses, or whatever she calls her idols, or why the deposed divinity should thunder his displeasure in my small habitation, and the fact is, I don't choose it."

"You quite mistake me."

"So much the better."

"I don't, at all, affect rivalry with the new divinity. I never had the distinction of standing upon an altar and receiving incense. It must be very pleasant, and judging from the enthusiasm, and the looks of the priestesses, there must be no small happiness, too, in the mere act of devotion."

"Come now, do speak plainly—what do you mean?" said Miss Laura Gray peremptorily.

"In the practice of idolatry everything is allegory and myth. Isn't it rather unreason-

able to ask me to speak literally?" said Charles Mannering, pleased, perhaps, to see evidence of irritation on the other side.

"I suppose you are joking," said the young lady. "If you have no meaning it is a bad joke, and if you have a meaning it is a worse one. I wish to know, once for all, what you do mean, if meaning you have any."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that it does strike me that an intimacy, which I suppose seems to other people quite natural, and *selon les règles* appears to have grown up, almost in an hour. I recognise the young gentleman as the same whom you thought so good-looking at the opera, the other night, and I suppose he has been properly introduced and all that, and that Ardenbroke, who is, I think, the only friend you have—of course I don't include myself—with the slightest claim to offer advice on such a subject unasked, has told you all that is necessary to know—I assume that—but still, the very distinguished confidence, and, in fact, the intimacy with which I find that

fortunate young gentleman received and entertained, at whatever hours it may suit him to drop in, does strike a person accustomed to see such relations grow up with a less tropical suddenness, as in the highest degree marvellous."

"Well, thank you for some plain speaking at last, and considering you have no right, as you say, to offer advice unasked, you contrive to exercise the privilege of saying and insinuating more rude things than any other modest young gentleman I have had the good fortune to hear of."

"You may resent it. I can't help that," said he, "but I think it would be neither kind nor right, if in a place like this city, I were to abandon you, with no more experience than a child, and no one but Mrs. Wardell to take care of you—Mrs. Wardell, who really knows very little more of the world than you do yourself—to the risk of being imposed on, or even compromised by your confidence in the professions of people who happen to turn up in a Babel so hand-

somely provided with sharks and sharpers, as London is."

"We happen to know, not from himself, but from people who are perfectly informed, and whose authority even you would not dispute, that Mr. Dacre is a person whom there could be no possible objection to knowing. I say this, neither as admitting your right to demand explanations, nor to make offensive remarks, but simply as a matter of fact, and as showing that we do not commit such extravagances as, in your phrase should compromise us."

"That which we desire to believe, we do believe often upon very slender evidence," said Charles Mannering.

"I don't think you perceive how very offensive, I may say insulting, your little speeches have become. You can't help making them, I dare say. I suppose people, in the main, act according to their natures, and yours is to say such pleasant things as you have entertained me with this evening. I take it for granted you must go on saying them, so I mean to go up to my room, not

having Julia Wardell's faculty of retiring into dreams and slumber; but, of course, you can waken her with one of those pretty speeches, as they wakened King Lear with music, and she has the advantage of a much better temper than I have." And with these words the young lady left the room.

She had not blown up Charles Mannering with half the spirit she might, at another time. A sense of fear and anxiety had in some measure tamed that wayward creature, and her manner was not so fierce as her words.

When she got to her room—at every step fancying she saw the peeping face of the odious little man whom she had seen at the window, that night, and in the hall—she sat down and asked her maid all about the search that had been made.

Every nook and corner had been searched, not a sign of the slightest disturbance anywhere detected, and it was plain that the person who had entered the hall could have only stepped in, looked about him, and withdrawn.

In a minute more Miss Laura Gray heard the hall-door shut, and a step pass away upon the dry court. She knew that step. It was Charles Mannering taking his departure. She smiled faintly as she fancied his feelings, his dignity, and his huff; and then she thought uneasily whether there might not be reason at the bottom of his reclamations.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LAURA GRAY'S FORTUNE TOLD.

A SMALL letter was laid upon her dressing-table next morning, as she entered ; Mrs. Wardell had placed it there. She was relieved at the first glance. It was not from her unknown correspondent. It was addressed in an extremely pretty hand, and at the foot of the page was "A. Dacre."

"My Dear Miss Gray," it said, "you see how impatient I am to use my privilege. Lest your servants should omit to mention the circumstance, I have to relate, that on going down-stairs, I learned from the servant that I had been honoured by an inquiry, as I conclude, from the same person who alarmed you by showing himself at the window, and who I have no doubt is implicated in the cowardly annoyance to which

you have been exposed. I instantly pursued, but not a trace of him was discoverable. Any direction you may be so good as to honour me with, I shall be only too happy to obey, if you will be so good as to send, during my three days' absence, to my address, Minivers Hotel, &c.

"Believe me, my dear Miss Gray,

"Ever Yours, &c., &c.

"P.S.—I think the bravado of last night will materially aid discovery. The one talent I really do possess, that of the detective, I devote to this enterprise. I had twice in my life to employ it before, and very quickly succeeded. Pray burn this letter. There are those whom I would not wish to know that I wrote. I entreat of you therefore to be secret for three days."

When Miss Gray came down she questioned the servant who had opened the door to the unknown visitor of last night. When did he come? A few minutes before Mr. Dacre left. Did he knock or ring at the door; or how was it? He came with a postman's knock. Would the servant know

him again? Yes, he was a low-sized, vicious-looking little wasp of a Jew—pale and surly. And what did he say? Only to ask if Mr. Dacre was here, and he asked the servant if he was quite sure, and seemed irresolute what to do, like a man making up his mind to mischief, but away he went again, so quick he could not tell which way he took. That was the narrative.

Now, Miss Laura Challys Gray was beginning to grow dissatisfied, and to quarrel with herself about several things. In the first place, had she done wisely in snubbing her honest cousin, Charles Mannering, whom she really wished to consult—whom, however, she found herself, by an understood obligation of secrecy, unable to consult—in whose eyes, her reason told her, she must inevitably appear so strange—possibly her conduct so equivocal, and to whom she yet could give no explanation? Had she done wisely in admitting this stranger—Mr. Dacre—to such strangely confidential relations? Had she not acted in panic—without thinking—without consulting even the

instincts of caution. The intimacy which had grown in a day or two between her and this Mr. Dacre, which seemed to her like a dream, did it not affright her at times? And, then, was she quite sure that the handsome hero of this little mystery, who had taken up her quarrel so good-naturedly, or rather so enthusiastically, of whom she thought through every hour of the day almost, for his words and looks were inseparably associated with the subject which so rivetted her thoughts—was she quite certain that she cared as little for him as in prudence she ought? Altogether, would it not have been wiser to open this matter, the importance of which she had possibly exaggerated immensely, to Lord Ardenbroke or Charles Mannering? It was now, however, too late; she could hardly remember how these relations with Mr. Dacre had come about. But, now, she felt she could not recede. There was really nothing against him. He had been zealous, but very respectful. He was a friend of Ardenbroke's. Whom better could she

have employed? And so on, inconsistently.

She was low. Her novel did not please her, nor music, nor work ; she had a headache ; she did not care for a drive or a walk ; her gardening wearied her ; she was in a state of unavowed suspense ; expecting news ; none came.

In the afternoon, near the hedge-row that bounded the lawn of Guildford House, came a big drum and pandean pipes resounding shrilly, and the grave brown-faced showman set up the stage of "Punch and Judy," and the time-honoured play began.

Here was a diversion. Miss Gray, who happened at the moment to be in the library, sent for her opera glasses, threw open the window, and amused herself with the Hogarthian picture of the motley crowd and the showman, seen pleasantly in the dappled sunlight under the trees.

When this pleasure, like all others, came to its end, she sat with her glasses in her lap at the open window. In a little while, the crowd having marched off with the

show-box and big-drum, there came to the gate a slender girl whom the person in the lodge would not allow to pass.

"She's a gipsy," thought Miss Gray, raising her glasses, and thus distinctly confirming her first impression. She touched the bell, and told the servant to tell the people at the gate to allow the girl to come up to the house.

Up came the girl—lithe, dark, handsome, smiling, with all the servile wildness of her race, with fine eyes, and brilliant little teeth.

"Send my maid here," said the young lady, not caring to be quite alone, though the window-stool interposed between her, and this wild child of fortune. "You can tell all that's going to happen us, can't you?" said the young lady, smiling with an odd mixture of curiosity, antipathy, and admiration upon her vagabond sister.

"Oh, yes, she would tell the pretty young lady her fortune, if my lady wished; she would look at her hand, and she hoped the pretty young lady would have everything she wished in the world, for, indeed, she

was pretty enough to be a princess, and dress in gold and diamonds, and pearls, and marry a king," and so forth.

"Have you told many fortunes to-day?"

"A deal of fortunes to-day, my lady. Yes, a great many pretty young ladies, but not one so pretty as you; no, no, my lady, indeed."

"Would you like to have your fortune told? I'm going to have mine," said Miss Gray turning to her maid, who had that moment come in. What maid could refuse such an offer. And, so, with a giggle, and a little toss of her head, she submitted.

So, Miss Mary Anne Mersey's hand told its secrets, and promised that amiable person her heart's content, and a rich tailor for her husband, and, finally, the sibyl added—

"And you will find, very soon, something that will make the young lady, your mistress, wonder!"

"Oh! something! Of what kind?" inquired Miss Gray.

"I can't know that, my lady. She will

find something that will give you a start ; yes, indeed, my pretty lady."

"You mean that will frighten me, do you?"

"Yes, my lady,—that will frighten you."

"La! what can she mean?" exclaimed Miss Mary Anne.

"I suppose we shall both be frightened, Mersey; but it can't be helped, and you have certainly got a great deal to console you, for I don't think a single thing has gone wrong in your fortune."

"Very nice hand, yes, very lucky," acquiesced the smiling prophetess.

"But she's to find something—how soon—that is to frighten me?" persisted the young lady.

"How soon is not fixed, but very soon, my lady. That will be by the stars."

"We shall learn time enough, Mersey, I dare say," and putting more money in her hand, with a smile, she extended her own for the chiromancer's examination.

"You will travel about a great deal,"

began the gipsy; "you will not settle at home for a long time."

"Hush! Mersey. You are not to say a word," said her mistress, warningly.

"And there's a handsome young gentleman in love with you, my lady, though you don't know it, and he will, maybe, be wounded shortly for your sake, maybe killed, and he'll leave you some money, for he's very rich, though you don't know it. He's young, and he's very handsome, and he loves you ever so much more than his life, and you'll marry some one, but I don't know whether him or no, and you saw him in a fair, or in a playhouse, maybe; some place where there was a show going on, and music, and that is all I'm sure about, my lady."

"And how soon is this unfortunate young gentleman to be killed or wounded in my service?" she asked, laughing.

"Ah! you would not laugh, pretty lady, if you saw the poor young gentleman bleeding."

"Oh! but you know there's a hope, isn't

there, that he may not be hurt at all, and what I want to know is, how soon the time of danger is to come."

"Soon, my lady, it can't be more than a year, but it might be to-morrow morning, a letter might come; it is some time very shortly."

"Well, thanks. Now, I think, we know everything," said Miss Gray.

"Is there any more young ladies would like their fortunes told, in the house, pretty young lady?"

"No, no, thanks, no one, and I think we'll say goodbye now?" said Miss Laura Gray, with a smile and a little nod.

The handsome young prophetess smiled and showed all her little white teeth and curtsied, and crossed the windows here and there, and up and down with her restless glance, and so, smiling and curtseying again, with many "thankies, my ladies," and "good lucks," away she went.

"A very good fortune you have got, Mersey, and much good may it do you. I'm not so lucky quite. My young gentle-

man is to be shot, whoever he is, on very short notice too ; and I'm to be frightened by something you are to be good enough to find for me. I shan't want you any more just now, Mersey."

Though the young lady knew that the gipsy was an impostor, and that, probably, the same prediction was repeated at every second window where she got a piece of money and an audience, yet, in her present mood, she would rather that the man at the lodge had taken his own way, and this little folly been omitted.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT MARY ANNE MERSEY FOUND.

THAT evening was unrelieved by a single incident worthy of being recorded, and Miss Gray was early weary—no note had reached her ; all was silent.

She went early to her room.

“ I’ll leave this tiresome place, Mersey,” she said; “ I’ll leave it in two or three weeks, I think ; do you like it ? ”

“ Like it—hates it—rayther, you mean, miss. I can’t think whatever bewitched you, Miss Challys, to come to such a dismal hole of a place. I’ve sat up an hour at a time, in my window, crying my eyes out. I told you the day after we came, miss, you could not bear to live here no time. ’Tisn’t a place where there’s nothing to recommend it. ’Taint country, miss, and it aint town,

no more; and when I look out of the window, them old trees, so like the church-yard at Gray Forest, and not a soul stirring, I do really, miss, I cries my eyes red again for downright lowness of spirits."

"I'm coming to the same way of thinking myself, Mersey; I believe I made a mistake when I came here. It's quite true, I hate what they call society, that is, balls and drums, and all that wear and tear, and racket, and fever; but then this is unnecessarily dull; and the fact is, it is so unnaturally quiet that I am growing quite nervous, and I believe a year of it would go very near making me mad."

"La, miss," rejoined Miss Mary Anne Mersey, who had been Laura's maid from Miss Gray's nursery days, and could consequently speak her mind fearlessly, "Of course it will make you mad. It is not natural, nor right, for young people to shut themselves up like that, and you so handsome, miss; a pretty thing with your fortune and all, you should go off into an old maid, with your fancies and vagaries."

Laura laughed, looking at her own pretty face in the glass before which she had seated herself. It seems to me a harmless satisfaction which young ladies seek in that sort of reflection.

“When you see me an old maid, as you shall, you need not trouble yourself about the causes of it, because I have weighed the matter well, and an old maid I’m resolved to be.”

“Well, if I could? But, no, Miss Challys; I don’t believe nothink of the sort. Why should you allow such an ungodly notion into your head?”

“Ungodly—is it? How?” inquired Miss Gray.

“Ungrateful to God, miss, for your wealth, and health, and beauty. Why, miss, it’s only natural you should choose a fine, handsome young gentleman that will love you with all his heart and soul, and be a good husband, and make you a happy wife and a good mother of a family.”

“Oh, Mersey! you suffocate me.”

“There, now, already there’s an uncom-

mon nice young gentleman as ever you need wish to look at—that lovely young man, Mr. Dacres, and he’s rolling in money besides.”

Laura blushed brilliantly, and with flashing eyes said angrily—

“ You could not have said a more absurd thing, Mersey, or a more awkward one. I almost think you are possessed. I’m obliged to see Mr. Dacre when he calls for half an hour in the evening. He has most particular business to speak of, and nothing could be more inconvenient than my being obliged to decline the information he is so good as to give me, and that, at any inconvenience, I should unquestionably do, if I thought any such monstrous folly could be talked by anyone upon the subject.”

“ And why should you feel like that, Miss Challys? How can you or me stop people talking if they likes it? And where could you see a handsomer or a nicer gentleman? And he has no end of money—and so generous he is. La, Miss Challys, dear. Old maid, indeed! What notions do come in your head, miss!”

"Well, Mersey, if you will talk like a fool I can't help it. Only I'd rather you talked of anyone but me. We'll go abroad, and see the world. You shall see such beautiful places—Paris and Rome, and Venice and Switzerland—and if there must be marrying you shall marry, for I wont. What do you say to a French restaurateur or an Italian artist?"

"Many thanks, miss; but I'm no more thinking of taking a husband than other people; and as for them foreigners, I can't abide the sight of them."

And as she whisked her handkerchief from her pocket at these hoity-toity words, a letter flew out on the floor. Taking it up she found the address to "Miss Gray, Guildford House."

"Letter to you, miss, please."

As she leaned back indolently in her low chair, the young lady received it, almost without looking, in her fingers; and it was not until she held it just under her eyes that she gave herself the trouble of looking at it. Turning pale, she exclaimed—

“My God! where did you get this?”

And, staring at it, she held it tightly pinched in her hand. Mary Anne Mersey was scared by the looks and exclamations of her young mistress.

“It fell out, miss. I think it must have been in my handkerchief—and—I don’t know. In my pocket, leastways—and I don’t know how in the world it ever has got there.”

Miss Laura Gray might well be a little startled, for there, at a glance, she had recognised the broad, firm hand which had grown to her so horrible.

Miss Gray stood up straight. She recognised the evil face of this letter, and her heart sank.

Her maid, with a frown and her lips pursed, was peering curiously in her frightened face.

There was something beside the letter enclosed in the envelope—a small, hard substance. The odd emblem was on the seal as before, and the legend, “Choose which Dart.”

She broke the seal, and impatiently plucked out the contents. The enclosure was a ring.

"This is so like my pearl ring!" she said, touching it with her finger, and looking in her maid's face inquiringly. "When did I wear it last?"

"I thought you had it on now, miss."

"No, no; look there, on the ring-stand."

"It ain't there, miss, and 'tain't on your finger, and that's it, returned in the note. You must have dropped it when you were out, or forgot it on the counter, maybe, in some shop."

Miss Gray took it up and scrutinized it near the candle's flame.

"It *is* my ring—it *certainly* is. How *can* this have happened?"

"Wont the note tell you, miss?"

Miss Gray read it in silence.

"You have sent a fool on his last errand. I enclose you proof that I have been in your house, where for half an hour the sword hung over his head. In and out, up and down your house, like tame cats, we know

pretty well what passes there, as you perceive. I have had the pleasure of sending you in succession two little reminders—a locket set with brilliants and a pearl-hoop ring. On the day after to-morrow I shall have the honour to present you with a larger and more precious packet, containing a suitable memento of a meddler, viz., the right hand of Mr. Alfred Dacre packed in lint."

"What is the matter with you, miss; you look very bad," said her maid.

"Nothing, nothing, too late to send a message. What o'clock is it, Mersey?"

"Past ten, miss. Half-past and three minutes, please."

"How much? Is it too late? I suppose we had better send to-morrow," said the young lady, with a puzzled air.

"Too late for what, miss, please?"

"Too late to send for Lord Ardenbroke, or—or for whom? Mr. Mannering—yes—yes—it must wait till morning."

"What is it, miss, nothing gone wrong, sure?"

“You had better run down and ask Mrs. Wardell, with my love, whether she can come up to me for a moment, or—*no*—don’t mind. Stay here, please,” she continued, in a suddenly altered voice. “I have,—let me think. Yes—Mary Anne Mersey, you must answer me honestly the questions I shall ask you. I’ll begin at the beginning—let me think! I’m stunned, I believe——”

Miss Mersey stood bridling a little, and looked from the corners of her eyes, in the young lady’s face, expecting what might come.

CHAPTER XXV.

MARY ANNE MERSEY EXAMINED.

“WHERE did you get this letter, Mary Anne?”

“Where did I get it, Miss? La! It tumbled out of my pocket, when I pulled out my handkerchief.”

“Oh, Mersey! How can you fancy I am to be put off so? How did you get possession of that letter? I must know. You know everything about it, and you *shall* tell me the truth.”

“But I *don't* know, miss, as I hope to be *saved*, miss, I don't!”

“It's a conspiracy—it's a conspiracy; those that ought to love me best are my betrayers. Oh, Mersey! how could you? Why are you so changed; what have I

done ; how can you league yourself with such wretches ?”

“ But, miss, I’ve done nothing ; may I choke if I tell you a lie.”

“ I’ll know what you have done. Yes ; you shall tell me everything. Come, Mersey, you had better tell me the truth, or I’ll find those who will make you,” said the young lady, with a sudden and fierce change of manner.

“ I’ve nothing to tell, so help me !”

“ Come, come, speak truth. Who gave you that letter ?”

“ No one, miss,” she replied, with sturdy vehemence.

“ Shame ! Why you took it from your pocket !”

“ No I didn’t, miss. I didn’t, please. No such thing. When I drew out my handkerchief, the letter was in it, and fell on the carpet, please, which you saw it yourself, miss.”

“ Then, by fair means, you’ll tell me nothing ?”

“ Fair or foul, miss, I’ve nothing to tell.

I have sawed nothing but what you have sawed yourself, miss, and I don't care who says it. I know no more about it than you do, miss."

Laura Gray paused, gazing in her face.

"I don't know what to think. I'm half-distracted. Mersey, you look honest; you have been always a good girl. I conjure you, don't deceive me; now, tell me all you know about it."

"I do tell you, miss, and it's nothing. You have made me ready to cry, you have; you misdoubt me so. It is very hard, it is."

And Miss Mary Anne Mersey began to whimper into her handkerchief.

"You need not cry, Mersey. It is I who should cry, if anyone cries. But here it's the fact. Some one in the house has been telling to people outside all that passes among us; our secret conversations, our visitors and their names, our plans; in short, everything. Who can it be? What am I to think? How can you have got this letter into your possession?"

"It must have stuck in my handkerchief, miss, by chance. No one gave it me. I never knew I had it till it fell on the floor, and I'll make oath to that anywhere you like, miss."

"It was not in the Post-office. It has no mark. It must have come by a messenger's hand. Some of the servants, then, must have put it into your pocket when you weren't looking. No, Mersey, it was only for a moment the doubt took possession of me, in this great perplexity. I am sure you would not aid in this cruel annoyance. But there are persons in this house who do, and who betray us to dangerous people outside, and repeat everything that passes among us."

"I wonder could it have been that fortune-teller; I was just thinking, miss. But she was standing outside, and we looking. I don't think she could."

"That did not strike me. They are such thieves, and do such things with so much sleight of hand. I should not wonder if it *were* she. I dare say it was."

Miss Laura Gray paused, thinking.

"But I think I had seen her, or felt her ; I'm sharp enough that way," said Mary Anne.

"Not so sharp as she though. Those people live by roguery and sleight of hand. The more I think of it, the more likely it seems. Don't you remember she said that you would find something that would frighten me? Yes ; and that some one would be in danger within a short time? It is only a guess though."

"Yes, your sweetheart, miss," said Mary Anne Mersey, thoughtfully.

Laura Gray blushed, and turned her eyes angrily on her maid, but there was not a suspicion of slyness ; a grave and perfect good faith, on the contrary.

"Well, there *is* a gentleman in danger, though he is nothing whatever of the kind, and if not in danger, actually, at all events, threatened with injury ; and as I don't fancy that gipsies are inspired, I believe she must have been told to say those things, and the only persons who could have told her are those who employ themselves in writing

these letters—I mean this letter that fell from your handkerchief—don't you see? Well, then, if that is so, all the rest is plain; for the same people who gave her her instructions wrote the letter, perhaps, but it is only conjecture; and is there any use in telling you to keep it secret? Will you promise to tell no one a word of what has passed, for two or three days, until, at least, I give you leave?"

"Not to Mrs. Wardell, miss?"

"Certainly not; but I meant particularly to the servants," said the young lady.

"Oh, no, miss, sure!" said Miss Mersey, so loftily that Laura felt almost moved to beg her pardon for having admitted a suspicion so vulgar.

"Mersey, you must sleep in this room to-night; I am so nervous. I dare say I'm a great fool, but I can't help it; and in the morning, with God's blessing, I shall have advice, and take steps to prevent all this. You know this ring—my pearl-hoop—I did not wear it yesterday?"

"I can't say, Miss; I'm not quite sure."

“Did I the day before?”

“I’m sure you wore it within the last three or four days, but I could not be sure which was the last, miss.”

“Very well, Mersey, but you must not say a word of it ; it will put people in this house on their guard if you do. That ring was taken out of this house, and has been returned ; and it is not the first proof I have had that we are watched, and betrayed.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHARLES MANNERING'S MISSION.

At about eleven o'clock, next morning, Charles Mannering knocked at the door of Guildford House. He had received an earnest little note, saying,—“If I was cross the other night, pray forgive me. I seriously want your help now. Don't say so to Mr. Gryston, or to any other person. No one is to know that you suspect that anything has gone wrong, or that I want advice—but come, and listen to the very odd story I have to tell, and, by doing so, you will help to relieve me of a real anxiety, and possibly save me from a real danger.”

He was full of curiosity, and a masculine belief in the trivial nature of this feminine complication. Wondering, too, why he had been directed in a postscript to say nothing

about the matter to her cousin, Julia Wardell. Now and then an unpleasant fancy that she might have glided into a romance, and begun to lose her way in its mazes, startled him with a momentary pang.

"A shark—a fortune-hunter, very likely—how could she be so mad? But, after the vows she is fond of repeating, it is hardly credible that she should dream of throwing herself away upon that fellow, of whom she knows absolutely nothing."

In came Charles. He had not seen Laura Gray in the drawing-room window—but as he put off his coat in the hall, she opened the library door, and called him in.

"First of all—we are good friends, you know?" said the young lady.

"You may quarrel with me, but I'll not quarrel with you, Challys," said he, looking at her very kindly and gently.

So she put out her hand to him, and there was another greeting, silent, but very friendly—and he said with a smile—

"Well, now, Challys, as we used to say at school, what's the row?"

"Shut the door—sit down there, and I'll tell you. It's a long story, Charles, and I'll begin at the beginning."

And so she did, and Charles listened, and gravely read the documents as she placed them in his hands, but when he came to the last he laughed. She looked with something of surprise and reproof at him—and he laughed the more.

"Well, really this is too good," he exclaimed.

"Too bad, I should have thought."

"You don't mean to say you believe it?" said Charles Mannering.

"Believe what?" she demanded.

"This rubbish."

"What rubbish, sir? Do, pray, Charles Mannering, speak intelligibly, if you mean me—but perhaps you don't—to understand you."

"Can you really believe that you are to receive Mr. Dacre's hand—might it not be better to send his foot, the member he has put in it—made up in paper, and directed to Miss Gray, to-morrow evening?"

Can you really have brought yourself to believe such a piece of incredible burlesque?"

"The whole thing, up to that, is incredible, and yet it has happened. Here, this locket for one thing. I asked Fleurise and Boyd what it is worth, and they say sixty guineas, and that it must have cost more than a hundred. Is it credible that any one should give away—to a total stranger—sixty guineas? You know it is monstrous. Is it credible, that the names of our visitors, and all my plans—though I scarcely speak them above my breath—should be known to people totally unknown to me—who yet seem resolved, by a kind of torture, to influence my conduct, and are animated by a hatred of that miserable Mr. Guy de Beaumirail, and who have discovered Mr. Dacre's pursuit of them, and threaten to put him out of the way. It is like a dream."

Charles Mannering listened patiently.

"And the night before last, while you were here, there came to the window of this

room a wicked-looking little man—and the same little demon I saw just as I reached the drawing-room door, stepping into the hall; I felt, for a moment, as if I should have fainted, and I had the house searched, but there was no one; and only ten minutes later he came to the hall-door, and inquired whether Mr. Dacre was in the house. You see they have a system of spies and messengers—and my pearl ring was taken away, and returned—merely to show that somehow they have access to the house, and that nothing is secure from them. Most unscrupulous they have proved themselves—cunning and savage—and their language is ferocious—and I can't in the least comprehend their schemes. And now I ask you, in the midst of this odious labyrinth, what am I to think or do?"

She paused, and as he did not tell her, she continued—"What am I to believe? I saw only the other day, in the newspaper, the discovery of a dead body described—supposed, it said, to be that of a French gentleman, who left his lodging about ten

days before. See how easy it is to murder without detection, in this great, wicked city—and, this morning, there is an account of some pieces of a human body, part of a foot and ankle—you will see it in the newspaper—tied up in a basket under the seat of a railway carriage, where it was left by some unknown person. And now, with all this, and things like it, continually happening in this vicious city, you say it is incredible that a stranger like Mr. Dacre should be murdered and cut in pieces. I wont argue more about it, it is disgusting, and frightful, and has haunted me all night.”

“Relieve your mind upon that point, however; it was simply said to terrify you. I assure you such a hoax would not have been attempted upon any one but an inexperienced girl like you—the idea of giving you notice! Do you fancy that a murderer meditating such a thing would apprise you beforehand, when you would merely have to send a friend to mention the matter to the police, to have detectives placed all

about to secure the examination, and the person, if need be, of every messenger who came to your door."

"You want to comfort me, Charles; it is very kind; but your argument wont do. I thought of all that. But, suppose a very nice carriage, with servants and all proper appointments, were to drive up to the door, in the afternoon, and a nice old lady to inquire particularly how I was, and leave a card, and also a parcel, would not that pass muster? or, suppose the public carrier should deliver the parcel; or one of my tradespeople, to whose shop it might be brought, should innocently send it here—there are so many ways of doing such a thing, with almost no risk of detection, and people who can deliver a letter like that here, and nobody be able to say how it came, could certainly do what they threaten. The best way, as it strikes me, to prevent their sending, is to apprize Mr. Dacre, who is primarily interested, of their designs."

"Have you the least idea or suspicion who these people may be?" asked he.

"None; but Mr. Dacre, who knows Mr. de Beaumirail, suspects, notwithstanding the ostentation of hatred assumed by these people, that he may really be implicated in the conspiracy—you men understand 'one another better than I can—but I don't very clearly see how that is possible."

"Nor I, either. I have been making inquiries about De Beaumirail, and I believe he is very ill indeed. I don't say, from all I hear, that he would have very many scruples about taking a part in a disreputable enterprize, although I don't quite know that he might not; but he is very ill. Gryston told me yesterday that he should not be surprised if he were dead, and buried, in a month."

"Well, well, well, what of that?" said the young lady, impatiently.

"Not much; only this, that being so, I don't see how, in any imaginable way, he could be of the slightest use to these conspirators, as you will give them that lofty title; a parcel of cowardly blackguards, London thieves, and swindlers, I suppose—the

first letter written in the character of an Aristides, and the last in the language of an assassin."

"That is not a reassuring view of the matter, Charlie; but something, you know, must be done."

"In any way you please to employ me, you have only to command me," said he.

"Thanks, Charlie; I know that," said she, gravely.

"Well, what shall I do? Shall I go to the police office?" he asked.

"No, pray; that would be a very public step," she said.

"We must take care to secure your house against the impertinences of these people, and I think the best way would be simply to tell the police; and I'll do that, if you'll allow me."

"Well, no; I say I should not like yet, at least. But do you know Miniver's Hotel?"

"Oh, yes; everyone knows that. Do you wish me to go there?"

"Yes; you'll go there, and see Mr. Dacre."

“But I haven’t the pleasure of Mr. Dacre’s acquaintance,” he said, a little dryly, as if he did not desire it; “and I don’t believe he’s in a bit more danger than I am; and—you’ll think me a great brute; but it is as well to be frank—I really don’t very much care. I don’t think I ever saw a fellow in whom I felt less interest.”

“Well, you will, I am sure, for my ——” and she paused.

“For your sake! Oh, that’s a different thing! for your sake, of course;” he laughed oddly. “You fancy an unseen circle of assassins round him, and I’m to break it for the purpose of warning him of his danger, and so diverting their fire upon me. But what of my unworthy life or person? For your sake, Challys—of course, I should go with pleasure.”

“But I didn’t say for my sake—you know I didn’t,” said she.

“You were going to say it, and you know you were,” said he. “Come, Challys, you used to love truth, and I won’t believe, till you tell me so yourself, that change

of place will ever change frank Challys Gray."

"I did not say it, Charlie," she answered; "but it is true I was on the point of saying it; and now I do say it—for my sake you will go there and see him, for he must be communicated with; and as he undertook the search after those people, for my sake, I do ask you, for my sake, to relieve my mind, by apprising him of that which, right or wrong, I cannot help believing may be a real danger."

"Yes, Challys, that form of invocation is, for me, irresistible. I will go; although I could hardly have imposed a more disagreeable duty—not, of course, that I bear him any ill-will, for I don't even know him, but that he is evidently such a—what can I say without giving offence? I was going to say such a prig, but I wont; but he is just the kind of conceited fellow who would meet one with those airs which I confess I can't endure."

"You mistake him very much, I assure you; when you know him a little you will

like him extremely," said Miss Laura Challys Gray, with that grave and gentle reserve, which, in jealous minds, excites suspicion.

"Well, what am I to tell him?"

"Tell him all I have related to you, that is, all that has happened since you and he were here to tea, the evening before last; he knows everything up to that."

"Does he? Oh!"

"Yes. I'll tell you some other time how that came about." She blushed. "You need not smile—there is nothing whatever to smile at."

"Nor to blush at?" said he.

"Nor to blush at," she repeated, with a flash from her fine eyes—"neither to smile nor to blush at. It may strike you as very ridiculous, to me it is a serious anxiety."

"Now, now, Challys, you must not quarrel with me so soon again."

"Quarrel? No. You'll understand it all perfectly, some day—that is, when there are five minutes to tell it in, but now there ain't. Just tell him you come from me—tell him

everything—learn all you can, and return here—Charlie, you are a very kind fellow,” and she gave him her hand.

So away went Charles Mannering upon his mission.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HE RETURNS.

I DON'T care to analyze the feelings with which he undertook this service for handsome Mr. Dacre. If they were of an unfriendly kind, he was not fool enough to allow his churlish feelings to show themselves in his demeanour. With his usual frank bearing and cheery tones he inquired for Mr. Dacre at Miniver's Hotel.

The hall-porter told him that he had orders to receive letters addressed to Mr. Alfred Dacre, if that was the name, but he did not know whether the gentleman was staying in the house. If he was, it must have been since this morning ; and, on inquiry, it turned out that no gentleman of that name was at Miniver's.

“Does he call for his letters, himself?”

"No one has called yet, sir."

“Was it he himself who ordered his letters to be taken in here?”

The hall-porter here inquired of the waiter.

“ No, sir, a gentleman known in the house ordered it.”

Into the coffee-room went Charles, and wrote this note—

“Miniver’s Hotel.

“MY DEAR MR. DACRE,

“Our friends at Guildford House requested me this morning to call, and, if possible, see you, in order to mention some circumstances which I find it impossible to detail in a note; but if you will be good enough to send me a line, to my rooms, at the Temple, No —, ——— court, naming any hour this afternoon, after three, I shall be happy to meet you at Miniver’s. “&c. &c.”

With the hall-porter he left his letter.

"Have you any idea where Mr. Dacre is at present staying in London?"

"No, sir."

Well, he had honestly done his best, and could return to Laura Gray with a clear

conscience. He would have a talk with her, and after luncheon return to town and see whether a note had arrived for him at his chambers, and if this failed, there was nothing for him to reproach himself with—nothing that Miss Gray could censure.

When he reached Guildford House, and walked up under the shadow of the elm boughs, Laura Gray was not among her flower-beds, nor in the library window—her yesterday's looking out from that window had not been lucky. But, from the drawing-room window, she was already looking out for him. On its pane he heard a tapping, as he approached; on looking up he saw her raising the sash.

He smiled and nodded, but she looked very grave, and beckoning him to quicken his pace, she leaned over the window-stone, and asked—"Any news?"

"No, nothing at present; but, by-and-bye, I shall hear."

"Nothing bad?"

"Nothing; nothing whatever. I'll run

up and tell you everything—which, in fact, is just nothing.”

As he traversed the hall and mounted the stairs his heart was sore and angry.

“She did not even say, thank you, and she has known me from the time she was beginning to walk and talk, and her head is full of that d—d fellow, just because he is a little handsome—though, hang me, if I can see it. How capricious and cruel and worthless they are!”

“Well, here I am,” he said, cheerfully, as he entered the drawing-room, “about as wise as I went away,” and with this preface he told her what had passed. “And now I have told my pointless story. Suppose we come out, the day is so delightful, among your flowers, and sit in that rustic seat there under the shade, and I promise to answer all your questions, if you still have any to put?”

“Come, then; I’ll show you how I get on at my gardening, and you shall admire the flowers; and shall I make a confession? I have grown such a fool, I have been shut

up here all day ; I have been afraid almost to look out of the window to-day, lest I should see one of those horrible gipsies. I am quite sure that girl brought the letter that came yesterday, and slipt it into Mersey's pocket while she was pretending to tell her fortune, and then she said things that showed a knowledge of what those wicked people intended. I sometimes feel as if she was a witch, and sometimes as if she was a cheat ; and I really am so nervous and ridiculous that you would pity me. But, under your protection, I think I may venture."

So, without waiting to get her hat, down she ran, and led the way to the steps, and together they descended to the shorn grass, and the brilliant flowers.

With a childish eagerness and volatility she talked over the perfections of her flowers, her plans and operations, and, for a time, her whole soul was wrapped up in these themes.

"I'm a good listener, Laura, don't you allow? "

"Yes, very good."

"A man, as a rule, I think, is a better listener than a woman," said he.

"Does not that depend on the subject a good deal?" said she.

"Well, I grant you, the fashions, the scandals——"

"Don't be impertinent."

"I believe I was very near being impertinent, for I was thinking of speaking the truth."

"Now, come, do be civil; it is a charming day, and here are we among the flowers, and I disposed to be perfectly polite, and what on earth happiness can there be in simply spoiling a tolerable half-hour by wanton incivility, I can't understand."

"But it is not wanton incivility—it has a purpose—I'm coming to my point."

"Oh! Then it is in cold blood?"

"Quite—and very harmless, as you'll see. I have observed, that on a tolerably interesting subject a man will listen a great deal better than a woman, as a *rule*; but when a woman

listens to such yarns, it is because, though the talk can't interest her, the talker does."

"Well, I'm interested by the talk at present; pray go on."

"I'm quite sure it is not by the talker," he said with a laugh, which didn't quite conceal his pique; "but I was going to say, the other night, when I drank tea here, when that interesting young gentleman, Mr. Dacre, whose hands are expected here this evening, made up, I believe, in parcels, was entertaining you near the drawing-room window, although I could swear there was not a word of sense in all he said—I never saw a human being so engrossed by language as Miss Challys Gray was by his."

"Oh, really! It is so good of you, I'm sure, to interest yourself in these things; but, somehow, I can't feel at all obliged, as I suppose I ought, and if you fancy that I'm going to account to you for everything I say or do, you'll find yourself very much mistaken." She had blushed brilliantly and was vexed. "And if you wish that we should continue friends, you'll not repeat

the attempt," Miss Challys continued, spiritedly.

"I do wish that we should continue friends, Challys—real friends, and that can only be on a footing of perfect frankness. You resent my assuming the airs of an adviser—I don't dream of taking that character upon myself, except as you invite, or at least, permit it; but you are very young, and Mrs. Wardell is, in some respects, as easily duped as a child, and cannot, therefore, be relied upon to warn you of the kind of danger to which an heiress, so young and charming as you, is exposed, when left so much to herself."

"You seem to fancy me a fool—you always talk in that tone," complained Laura.

"If I ever talk in that tone, it is when I am vexed, and I myself foolish. It is because I honestly think you so clever, that I think it is a pity you should not be reminded of those facts and omissions, on which you are so capable of forming a sound judgment. Now, I only ask, and that

surely is not advising, and I don't want the answer for myself, only, unuttered, for your own consideration—do you know anything on earth that honestly deserves to count as evidence of the character, family, means, or position of this Mr. Dacre, who is stealing, so far as I see, into an intimacy here, to which the best man in England might be proud to be admitted.”

Laura Gray turned her dark eyes on him, as if to read the full meaning of his concluding words.

“ Well, Charlie, I'm not angry with you—on the contrary, I'm grateful,” she said, after a silence. “ It is better to say all one thinks ; and it is better, I dare say, sometimes, to be obliged to think over things, even when we fancy we have quite made up our minds. But you wrong me, and Julia Wardell, too, if you fancy that we have not made inquiries, and all we have learned is satisfactory, and I should probably never have seen Mr. Dacre a second time, were it not for this persecution which has forced me to trouble you also ; and you now under-

stand what you did not know before—the subject, the only one upon which anything differing from the most commonplace conversation has ever passed between Mr. Dacre and me.”

Laura Gray, with all her spirit, blushed easily. Charles knew this pretty weakness of hers, and, therefore, though she blushed a little as she spoke, it did not trouble him much, and, on the whole, his mind was rather quieted.

“And now, Charlie, come in and lunch with me and Julia Wardell, and then I’ll let you go, since go you must; and you’ll come early to-morrow, wont you—or to-night, if you can? or, at all events, if you have anything to tell.”

“Always too happy, Laura, to come here, and delighted when you employ me; and, I hope, one of the truest friends you have on earth.”

This was spoken with effusion. Laura looked at him gravely, and then down on the smooth grass; then, with a little smile up at the sky, and, listlessly, she said—

“Do you understand the signs of those clouds? I wonder what kind of weather we are going to have.”

“Not weatherwise, Challys — no,” he answered, with a sigh, and a smile, and a little shake of the head, as they walked towards the steps; “not weatherwise—in *any* way.”

END OF VOL. I.

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